

“You Will Have Treasure in Heaven”*“Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21).*

Today’s Gospel reading features a man who came to Jesus with a question about eternal life. Mark doesn’t tell us his name. We don’t know the circumstances surrounding this unexpected meeting, and the text doesn’t provide many details at all about this character. Matthew’s Gospel tells us that the man was “young” (Matthew 19:20). Luke mentions that the unknown man was a “ruler” of some kind (Luke 18:18). But beyond these brief descriptions, we simply don’t know much about this guy at all. And yet, in the last line of the reading, Mark tells us that this man with whom Jesus discussed eternal life was one who “had great wealth.” In fact, each one of the three evangelists who included this story in their Gospel makes sure to mention that this man was very wealthy. In an account that’s so skimpy on detail, these words jump off the page and instantly become a very important element of the story. This was a rich man. He wasn’t just well-off. He didn’t simply “make a good living.” All three Gospel writers are careful to tell us that this was a man of “great wealth” – that’s the language of the text – and this fact makes the opening action of our reading quite remarkable.

Mark writes, “As Jesus was on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him” (Mark 10:17). It’s important to note that the rich man’s approach was one of humility. First, the man runs up to Jesus. This is a detail that’s easy to overlook, but there is meaning in this detail. A man of great wealth would never “run” anywhere; certainly not so that he could then take the modest posture of kneeling before some unauthorized, religious teacher. But in this gesture, we see that this rich, young ruler looked to Jesus as more than just another Rabbi. He truly respected Jesus as a “good teacher” and his question to Jesus showed that he was thinking of more than just the comforts of this world. “Good teacher...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17).

What a question! After all of the things that Jesus had been asked: questions about fasting...questions about healing on the Sabbath...questions about eating with unclean hands...questions about who was the greatest in the Kingdom of God...questions on the lawfulness of divorce...questions designed to test him...questions meant to trap him...questions focused on all the wrong things. After all of these questions, this rich, young ruler finally asked Jesus a question that mattered. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

In some ways, the man’s question must have thrilled Jesus. Finally, someone concerned with eternal things! Yet even with his humble approach and earnest greeting, Jesus knew that the rich man’s question was born of a sinful and arrogant heart, and so in response, Jesus began with a question of his own, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). Jesus’ odd response to the man was not false humility and it wasn’t an attempt to confuse the young man. Rather, in this question, Jesus launched a full-force attack on the rich man’s flawed thinking; one meant to redefine the idea of what it meant to be good; one designed to unmask the true motive behind the question.

It was clear from the man’s initial inquiry that his understanding of God’s Kingdom was completely dependent on what *he* could do. He understood “goodness” as something that was connected to performance and worth, and, as a man of “great” wealth, his question about eternal life was essentially this: “How much is this going to cost...What’s it going to take...What do I need to do to get to heaven?” And Jesus wouldn’t stand for even a hint of this self-righteous, works-based theology.

Not even giving the man a chance to respond, Jesus moved right to the heart of issue. “You know the commandments” Jesus said. “Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother” (Mark 10:19). Now, if you’re following the text, you’ll notice that in verse 19 Jesus took the young man straight to the Law of God contained in the Ten Commandments, and, in these words, it almost sounds as though Jesus was answering the man’s questions about eternal life by writing a prescription to simply keep the commandments.

You can almost see the man’s chest puffing up with pride as he answered the good teacher by saying “all these things I have kept since I was a boy.” *And there it was!* In just a few simple sentences, Jesus had uncovered the truth. With surgical precision, Jesus had diagnosed the man’s problem and now, as he stood in front of this patient who (spiritually speaking) was dying on the table, He pressed ahead to cut out the cancer that was consuming this man’s soul. “One thing you lack...Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21).

With these words, Jesus made the decisive cut. He knocked the self-reliant legs out from underneath this wealthy, would-be disciple, and, as Mark records, “At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Mark 10:22). Jesus’ goal in this brief meeting was not to encourage this man to work harder, or to be a better commandment keeper. His words to the rich man were designed to strip away any pretense of perfection, any illusion of goodness to which this man was clinging, and to expose the truth of his sinful, dying heart. And today, that is exactly what we need to hear in these words.

In his book *“Fearfully and Wonderfully Made”* Paul Brand comments on today’s Gospel reading. He writes, “I have been re-reading the record of the Rich Young Ruler and...it has set me thinking. No matter how much wealth he had, he could not ride in a car, he couldn’t have any surgery, he couldn’t turn on a light, buy penicillin, hear a pipe organ, watch TV, wash dishes in running water, type a letter, mow a lawn, fly in an airplane...or talk on the phone. If he was rich, then what am I?”

As we consider today’s text, that question is more than fair. And the obvious implication of his reflection is that we are people of “great wealth.” Even in these days of high unemployment and great social need, we experience material abundance in ways that the people of the first century could never have imagined. And one of the great dangers of the relative wealth we all enjoy is that it feeds our egos. It encourages us to be self-made men and women; to be totally independent; to make our way in the world without help from anyone else; and in our worldly culture, and in our wayward hearts, self-reliance is one of our highest virtues. Brothers and sisters, we are just like the self-righteous man who approached Jesus asking what he must do. And just like the rich, young man we need to hear Jesus’ crushing words.

Jesus directed this man to the commandments precisely to teach him that he hadn’t, he wouldn’t, and he couldn’t do what he must do to gain eternal life. In His words to the rich man, Jesus purposely focused on the commandments that deal with our outward actions toward neighbors, and He did that to show us that it isn’t a matter of doing the right things; that even when we do the outward actions demanded by God’s Law, we still have hearts that cling to our own efforts and abilities; we still have hearts that have broken the “first and greatest” commandment to love God above all things.

When we think about salvation, we naturally want to know what it’s going cost us; what it’s going take from us; what we need to do to get to heaven. And to our sinful and self-reliant hearts Paul writes that, “no one will be declared righteous in (God’s) sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). That is why Jesus deals with the rich, young man in the way that He does, and the key to understanding His approach is found in verse 21 where Mark writes that, “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (Mark 10:21). You see, the Law of God is centered in a love that cannot bear to see us dying in our sin, and the Law of God is given to us to show us how great our need truly is, to uncover our attempts to do it on our own, and to lead us to the one and only path to eternal life.

One of my frustrations with this story is that we don’t hear the rest of it. We don’t know what effect Jesus’ use of Law had on the rich, young man. Some commentators have gone so far as saying that this rich, young ruler turned out to be the author of this Gospel himself. I like that thought, yet the truth is we don’t know how this intimate encounter with the Christ impacted the heart of the rich man.

But we do know this: That just as Jesus looked at the rich man from our text, so also Jesus looks at us. He looks at us in our sin. He looks at us in our pride. He looks at us in our arrogance and He sees the truth of our hearts...and He loves us! In fact, He loves us so much that He would willingly take on our sin, and resolutely carry it to the Cross, and there alone, die the death that we deserved...all so that we can inherit eternal life!

Salvation isn’t based on us in any way. It is only and always a result of the love that our Savior has for us sinners. And in confessing that love and believing His promise, we sinners have treasure in heaven. Amen.

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