

17As 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?"

18"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered, "No one is good—except God alone."

Oy! I think it was a Freudian slip that I submitted the wrong scripture passage for the bulletin today. Here we are, just a few sentences into this one and we have a man falling on his knees before Jesus, asking what he needs to do in order to inherit eternal life and instead of being pleased that the guy is interested, Jesus chastises the poor fellow saying, "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone." Geez, Jesus. Give the guy a break. He's just trying. I think we can understand Jesus' point that God is the font of all goodness and blessing and anything that is good about Jesus or any one of us for that matter is a direct result of God's working in our lives, but must Jesus be so "in your face" about it? And Jesus continued saying to the man . . .

19You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

20"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

It's looking a little bit better for the fellow—maybe this passage wasn't such a mistake after all. Everything Jesus has said is necessary in order to inherit eternal life—the guy has or hasn't done, he hasn't murdered, hasn't slept around, hasn't stolen, hasn't lied, hasn't defrauded, and has honored his mother and father ever since he was a boy. Sounds like he's got his bases covered until . . .

21Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," Jesus said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Anybody else hate the direction this story has taken? I do. Is Jesus serious, that the guy has to sell EVERYTHING and give to the poor in order to have treasure in heaven? The man who has dedicated his life to following God's law, the man who has dropped down on his knees in front of Jesus because he recognizes that Jesus is someone special—this guy who only wants to please Jesus and spend eternity wrapped in God's loving embrace—his face falls and he goes away sad because he has great wealth.

Now, if we are like this man—which everyone of us in this room is because even if some of us are having a hard time with finances we are, according to global standards, living in the top 5% of people in terms of financial wealth, we too are likely feeling sad. We come here to hear Gospel—the Good News—and right now it's seeming like this is anything but good news. Indeed, should we just throw in the towel right now, sell the building, and engage in a life of licentiousness and debauchery because if there's no way that we're going to inherit eternal life because we've got some spare change well then, let's spare no expense when it comes to having a good time with our spare change.

And yet, that can't be quite right either, can it? There's something missing here, don't you think? And to find out what that something might be, I turn to a text book I had for a class in Chicago this past summer—a class called "Preaching and the Economic Realities of Life". The author of a text entitled *Wealth as Peril and Obligation* reminds us that the over-arching theme for Mark's gospel is that of discipleship. And she goes on to say, "The rich man [in this passage] stands as a kind of antitype of discipleship because he is unable either to leave or to follow . . . He cannot leave behind the power conferred by his possessions to become one who receives . . . ; and he cannot travel on the road to Jerusalem [with Jesus] because he cannot give up the life he has even for the sake of the life he searches for."¹ Now here in lies the crux of the interpretation, while we cannot put aside the idea that following

Jesus may, in some instances, require poverty, “the central concern of Mark’s Gospel is not wealth but discipleship, and the punch line of our story is not ‘whatever you have sell it’ but rather ‘come, follow me.’ . . . Wealth has no importance at all except as a stumbling block—which is to say, it would have had no importance at all if it had not prevented [the rich man] from following.”² Because the man cannot “give up the life he has even for the sake of the life he searches for”, he cannot follow Jesus. He cannot heed the call, “Come, follow me.”

Now, for the man in this story, the life he cannot give up is the life of power and influence conferred upon him by virtue of his wealth. But, what he thinks he owns actually owns him to the extent that he can’t give it up in order to do that which he yearns to do—namely follow Jesus. Wealth is his stumbling block and if wealth is his stumbling block the question we might ask ourselves is, is wealth our stumbling block? Are we so consumed with getting and earning and keeping and having that we can’t live the lives that God is calling us to live? If the answer is yes, well then we find ourselves in the same boat as the man in this story—unable to follow Jesus because we can’t let go of our wealth. But what of those around here who regularly give generously of wealth, or give up opportunities to gain wealth, in order to follow Jesus. Are we off Scott free? Does this verse not apply to us.

Well, no, that’s not it at all. The question is not, does this story apply to me but rather, *how* does this story apply to me? If wealth is not your stumbling block to heeding Jesus’ call to “Come, follow me”—what is? What is it that you are not willing to give up in order to follow Jesus? What’s holding you back from a life of authentic and genuine discipleship? To what are you grasping so tightly that you can’t just let go and grab hold of the hand Jesus is extending to you?

Is it power and control? Are you so bent on controlling your own life and the lives of others that you can’t let go and allow Jesus to exert his power over you instead of you exerting your power over others?

Is it alcohol or drugs? Are you addicted to these substances or just so enamored by how you feel when you’re under their influence that your obsession with the next drink or the next hit pushes any thoughts of following Jesus back into the shadowed recesses of your mind?

Is it approval and acceptance? Are you so in need of the approval and acceptance of other people that you live according to their expectations of you rather than God’s expectations of you?

Or, is it money and wealth? Are you like the rich man and instead of owning your possessions, your possessions own you to that extent that—if it came to push or shove—you would shove Jesus out of your life before you’d shove your house or property or fancy car or shiny bling-blings out?

Oy, we still haven’t run into all that much Good News now have we? Except that, when Jesus broke the bad news to the rich man we’re told that Jesus “looked upon him and loved him.” Even when the man couldn’t fully love Jesus, Jesus still fully loved the man. And even when we can’t give up our wealth or addictions or personal wants and needs, in order to fully love Jesus looks at us and loves us. And for this week, that’s the extent of the Good News. Jesus loves us. BUT, there’s more next week. More good news—lots of good news. But, before we can experience the good news, we need to acquaint ourselves with the bad news. And perhaps that is what this week is about—the bad news of discovering and discerning what your stumbling block to following Jesus is. But doing it with the recognition and realization that no matter what it is, Jesus is looking at you and loving you. And indeed, will love you right back here to next week when we’ll complete what we’ve started today, after all we’ve only made it through 5 of the 14 verses of this passage. There’s a lot here. So come back next week and we’ll discover the rest of the Good News together. Thanks be to God.

² 51-52