

Jesus and the Rich Young Man
Sermon for October 13, 2024
Sara Coles, Licensed Lay Preacher

In Mark's Gospel, Chapter 10, we hear about Jesus in the course of his ministries. He is approached by a pious man who asked him: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Bible scholars refer to this man the "rich young man" or the "rich young ruler," even though he is never called that in the Bible. There are similar stories about him in the gospels of Matthew and Luke.

First, Jesus answers the man by telling him to obey the commandments; he specifically mentions the parts of the Decalogue that have to do with how to treat other people. The man replies that he already follows them, and asks what else he can do; Jesus tells him "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

The man was rich and owned many possessions, so this advice was highly upsetting to him, and we are told that he was shocked and went away in great distress. After the man left, Jesus continued to talk to his disciples about wealth: "...How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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." The disciples had

already given up their previous lives to follow Jesus and found this statement pretty shocking, as Peter pointed out.

This was like “preaching to the choir.” Jesus acknowledged the extreme sacrifices of the disciples who had left their families, their possessions, and their livelihoods. He told them that those sacrifices will bring them eternal life.

What are we to make of this passage? Are our wealth and possessions good things or bad things? Being wealthy certainly confers privilege, in the 21st century just as it did in the ancient world. Does that mean that we are supposed to sell everything we own and give it to the poor? We live in Litchfield County Connecticut, which is one of the most affluent areas in the country. Some of us might definitely be considered rich, and most of us are not exactly rich, but we are comfortable. We own homes, some of us multiple homes. We drive cars, many very expensive cars. We take vacations and send our children to private schools and colleges.

Does this mean that Jesus hated rich people? He certainly spoke harshly about wealth. But when we look back at the Scripture passage, we see that Jesus didn't seem to be surprised that the man turned away from him.. He also didn't pass judgment on the man. Mark tells us that Jesus loved the man, even though the man rejected his advice and walked away from him.

A little known German theologian named Justus Knecht did not believe that Jesus meant his words literally. He described the rich young man as wanting to reach a higher state of perfection. He wrote: “There is no desire more noble, or more pleasing to God than the desire for perfection; and as our Lord looked at the young man, He loved him for this yearning of his soul.” Knecht also wrote that unfortunately the young man "resisted our Lord’s gracious invitation, because of his too great attachment to the things of this world.”

Jesus knew that wealth was not bad in itself, but it made things more difficult for a person who was wealthy to realize their full dependence on God. Jesus told his disciples, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Jesus might have said, “Well, of course he couldn’t take the difficult path. I didn’t expect him to. He didn’t take the difficult path because it’s impossible for him to do so.”

Whether we have a lot of money and possessions or not, I believe that Jesus wants us to use whatever we have for the greater good. He wants us to not be attached to our wealth and to our gifts. He wants us to share them. If you have a lot of money, that might mean giving it—at least some of it, maybe even a lot of it—to a charity that helps the poor, such as a homeless shelter or food bank, and yes, to the church. The meaning of “rich” may have less to do with how much money we have as it does with what our attitude is about the money we have.

What if the person who approached Jesus was not a rich man, but somebody else? What would Jesus have told that person to do in order to attain eternal life. They don't have a lot of money, so he wouldn't tell them to give it away. Would he have said: give some of your food to the poor? Spend some time taking care of sick people? Teach someone to read? We don't know what Jesus would have said.

We do know that our possessions are not only material wealth and accumulation of things. They also include our spiritual gifts. And yes, it might mean donating your time and your talents: to a shelter, a food bank, a senior center, a literacy program, or to one or more of the many ministries of this parish. It might mean practicing radical hospitality! Every gift from God also carries with it God's hope for how we might use that gift.

Some people have a lot of money but they are not enslaved by it; other people have very little but they cling to it with desperation. The rich young man, who seemingly wanted an answer to how he could attain eternal life, could not do what Jesus told him to do. Jesus had told him the key to his salvation, and the man was not able to do just that. He couldn't imagine giving away his possessions. His material wealth was too important to him. And because he could not give it up, he went away, sad and dejected.

Jesus is not telling us that we should suffer or be in need to be his followers. He tells us that it is God's will that we receive our daily bread

—everything we need for abundant life: food and clothing, home and shelter, work, family and friends.

Jesus knows and understands that our capacity for pride and sin and error is unlimited. And in spite of all that, he loves us. His love for us is unchanging, unmoving, and unwavering. Only God can see us completely, see us even and especially in our worst moments, and still love us completely.

Eternal life does not mean life until the end of time. It is not about quantity, but quality. Eternal life means a deep connection with the values of the Kingdom of God. Eternal life describes the quality of relationship between ourselves and God, and brings us to a knowledge and experience with the loving spirit of God.

Don't feel bad if you are confused by this or if it doesn't make a lot of sense. Volumes and volumes have been written about this, by scholars and other writers, trying to make sense of it and understand how it applies to our modern lives. I read a lot of other sermons and commentary on this passage and I still don't think I understand it much better than I did before I started.

I will leave you with three questions that we should all look at in our own Christian lives:

What are the gifts that God has given us?

What is God's hope for the use of those gifts?

Are we able to let go of whatever it is that keeps us from following Jesus?

Lord of abundant riches, when a rich young man was asked to give everything to follow Jesus, he fell short. Give us the courage to give everything that we have to you, knowing that what you offer us is more valuable than all the riches in the world.

Amen.