

The Poor Will Be Rich

Mark 10:17-31

Almost everyone in this world longs for eternal life.

Before you disagree with me, let me explain to you what I mean by “eternal life”. By it, I do not mean a life that just goes on and on and on. Those who experience eternal life will surely live forever -- but that’s not all it is. No, by eternal life, I mean the same thing the Bible means by it, i.e., the kind of life that only an eternal God can give. It’s life as your Creator created you to live before evil entered the world. It’s life as life is supposed to be. Eternal life is what people in our day sometimes mean when they speak of happiness. When you experience something that does not seem to be the way life is supposed to be, you find yourself longing for eternal life. Any time you sense something is missing in your life and want it to be different, you find yourself longing for eternal life. What the Bible means by eternal life is life to the full – and only God can give it.

Today, we meet a man in the Bible who wanted eternal life – and thought that Jesus might be the one who could help him find it. Did you notice how urgently he approached Jesus in **Mk 10:17** -- *A man ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to have eternal life.”*

It’s evident that this man had tried a number of things to find life. He had tried religion. Ever since he had been a boy, he had tried hard to find fulfillment by doing everything that he thought his parents and his God would have him do. In spite of that, he discovered that something was still missing.

But, what **I want us to focus on mostly today is that he seemed to think that he should have been experiencing more fulfillment in life because of all his wealth.** After all, those who have money can have lots of great experiences, prestige, privilege and influence. He had those things – but something was still missing. Can you relate to him at all today? We call him the rich young ruler because Mt 19 reports he was young, and Luke 18 tells us he was a ruler. So, I can imagine a few of you thinking, “Oh, good. I don’t have to listen today because I’m not rich, young or a ruler.” But, beware – this is a passage of Scripture that seems to have spoken personally to everyone, everywhere throughout all of history. If you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will discover that this story takes all that we’ve spoken about in this series and applies it to everyday life.

Let’s simply let the story guide us as it is told in Mark’s Gospel:

See: The “Banter” about Jesus Being Good – Do you see who Jesus is? *“Good teacher,” the man said... “Why do you call me good?” Jesus replied. “No one is good—except God alone **(10:17-18)**.”*

When the young man called Jesus “good”, it seems at first glance, to have been a rather innocuous remark. But Jesus saw it as an opening to probe how well this man was seeing. What did the man mean when he called Jesus “good?” Could this young man be seeing Jesus more clearly than the disciples who had been with Jesus for 3 years? In Jewish writings, there are no examples of a rabbi ever being addressed as “good”. Does this enthusiastic young man know Jesus is the one and only Son of God? When Jesus asked him what he meant by calling him “good”, he was forcing the young man to come to grips with the implications of his own words.

So, this wasn’t just small talk when Jesus asked this question. Jesus was getting at the most important thing in his life. He was asking, “Do you really see who I am? If so, do you understand that I truly am the one who can give you what you long for so much.”

With that in mind, let’s see if the man has seen. Let’s see if he understands the implications of meeting the one he has just called “good”.

Understand: The Issue of Keeping the Law – Do you understand that “gods” can keep up from God? *“You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Do not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy **(10:19-20)**.”*

Before waiting for the man to answer his question about what he meant by “good”, Jesus asked the young man about the 10 Commandments because, according to the Scriptures, they were given so that people might live well, i.e., have that kind of life that this man came to Jesus for (cf, **Dt 5:33**). Interestingly, Jesus mentioned only the commands found in the 2nd part of the 10 Commands, the ones about how we are to treat people. “

In response to Jesus’s words, the man made a claim that might surprise you. *“All these I have kept since I was a boy.”* And Jesus did not correct him. I’m not sure the man was claiming to have obeyed them all

perfectly. I think the young man was probably sincere when he said that he had sought to keep all those commands. I'm pretty sure he was like many people we meet in our own day, i.e., he really wanted to live a good life, i.e., he had tried to do all the things his parents and priests had said he should do. He tried to treat people well. I imagine he was a kind and generous boss and a man who cared for the poor. But, being the good boy and trying to keep all the rules had left him still knowing something was missing in his life.

Listen carefully right now. **Notice that the commands Jesus did not mention all have to do with people's relationship to God.** In case you don't know, the first four commands all have to do with putting God first in our lives if we will have the kind of eternal life this young man longed for. And the command that is foundational for all commands is the 1st command: "*You shall have no other gods before me (Dt 5:17).*" In other words, if you will have eternal life, you will not find it if you put anything into God's place in your heart and your affections. Just keeping God's other laws will not bring you the life you were made for if God is not first.

So, will this man understand the implications seeing Jesus as "good". Would he grasp that, when Jesus called, he would be hearing the call of God. Or, was there another "god" in his heart?

Respond: The Biggest Decision in Life -- Will you obediently trust Jesus and find the life you seek? *Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said... (10:21ff).*

The word Jesus used here, i.e., "lack", really means "to weigh down." In other words, Jesus looked into the inner being of this young man to see what was first in his heart and he saw one thing weighing him down, anchoring him to this earth, and keeping him from eternal life.

So, Jesus says, "I see what is weighing you down and keeping you from life. And, here is how you will find that eternal life you so desire: "*Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me (10:21).*"

So, this was a life-transforming decision. Jesus was calling him to give up all the wealth he had – including all the things his wealth could buy; all the golf and social clubs his money could give him entrance to... It was a choice of who or what would be his God. If he chose to trust Jesus, the man would jeopardize all the influence and reputation and power his wealth had secured. If this man were to listen to Jesus, obey Jesus, the decision to do so would surely affect his relationship to his family, his status in the community and the entire way of life that he had established.

Do not miss the phrase at the beginning of **v. 21**, "*and Jesus loved him.*" That means, "Young man, there is more for you in life than just keeping commands. I have more for you than all the things your possessions can give you. Trust me. Follow me" You see, when Jesus takes something away, it is out of love – not spite. If this man would have trusted Jesus and followed him, he would have found the eternal life he desired. But you know what happened. Mark describes the man's response movingly in **v. 22**, "*At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*" The word "sad" was a very strong and poignant word that probably is better translated "grieved". It has to do with a person grieving something that is lost -- grieving the loss of something at the center of our lives. It was the word used of Jesus when he was sweating drops of blood and grieved the loss of connection with his Father.

Jesus told him that he had to get that idol out of his life or he would never really bring God in. But, it was too much. The rich young ruler held on to what was central to his own soul and gave up eternal life.

Does this speak to you at all? Can you see yourself at all in this young man?

I know that **a passage like this raises lots of questions** so let me give brief responses to two of them:

1. **Does everyone have to give up every possession in order to have eternal life?** The answer to that is clearly no. In the Gospel of Mark, there were others, like a man in Mk 5:1-20, who wanted to give up everything and follow Jesus – but Jesus sent him right back to his house. There are some in Mark's gospel who follow Jesus and sometimes don't even have water to drink and others who still have water to give to those who don't. **Jesus does not ask everyone to give up all possessions – but he does say that whatever is first in your heart needs to be surrendered so that God will be God in your life.** If you will have eternal life, you must give up your idols and make Jesus Lord.
2. **Does this passage only apply to those who are rich?** Again, I say no. In fact, as Tite Tienou once said to me after he had returned from a trip to West Africa: "The coveting of riches among the poor has become

such an obsession that the possessions have become the god that many people seek. Too many do not want God. They only want the health and wealth they hope they can force God to give them.” You see, possessions can weigh you down whether you have them or whether you covet having them.

So, let me try to summarize one point that I think applies to us all: Those very things that we put at the center of our lives in order to make us happy will always end up taking our happiness away. Instead of them giving us eternal life, they will keep us from it.

That idol may be an academic degree that, when you get it, you think will change everything. It may be a job promotion – an athletic accomplishment – all the items you have on your “bucket list” to do before you die, etc. You can have and do all those things but, if Jesus is not Lord and, through him, God is not the God of your heart, you will not have the eternal life this rich young man sought and left behind.

The Postscript: God Provides – Often through His Children (10:28-31).

There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time... with persecutions... (10:30)

In vv. 28-31, we see the most neglected part of the story of the rich young ruler. When the rich man left Jesus, Peter and the disciples were shocked. This man had represented what they had hoped to become when they followed the Messiah. That man was religious, and he had power, possessions and prestige too.

But today, of the many things we could consider from these four verses, let us focus on the fact that obeying Jesus would have left this young man destitute: no home, no bank account, no savings, no resources to finance his children’s education, no health insurance... And, almost certainly he would have been the object of scorn in his family and among his friends. How would he even survive? I want to show you something here because sometimes, we think that if we have to give up something that has become an idol, we’ll be devastated. It’s easy to think that obeying Jesus will ruin our lives rather than give us life to the full.

So, let’s see how Jesus spoke to those disciples who wondered about that? How would this man have lived if he had followed Jesus? How were Peter and the disciples to live if their families kicked them out and they lost their jobs? On one side, Jesus gave a great promise that will be true for all who follow him, i.e., “in the age to come, you will have eternal life (v.30).” But that doesn’t answer the question of how they were to live in this age. They had to leave everything behind to take the gospel to the world, so how would they survive?

Jesus provided a very practical answer in v.30: “You will be brought into 100-fold now in this time -- houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and lands...” This is family talk from Jesus. And part of it sounds pretty good – like 100-fold houses and lands. But what about this 100-fold mothers? Do you want that? And 100-fold children? Does that sound like good news to you? Was Jesus saying, “Don’t worry when you follow me. You’re going to get 100-fold mothers and children -- with persecutions!” What was he talking about?

Lake Avenue people, you have heard me talk about this for 11+ years -- so you may have an intuition of what I think Jesus was talking about. He put it so profoundly – though you must listen carefully to his words to get it. Jesus gave us two lists -- one in v.29 and the other in v.30:

What you might leave: house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, and lands.

What you will gain: houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and lands – with persecutions.

Look at those lists. What is in the 2nd list that is not in the 1st? Persecutions. That doesn’t sound like good news, does it? But, it is real. And, it is temporary. Don’t be surprised when it is hard to be a Christian.

What is in the 1st list that is not in the 2nd? Fathers. When we follow Jesus, we do not gain 100-fold fathers for there is only one Father in this family – one Father, as Paul puts it in **Eph 3:14**, “before whom the entire family in heaven and one earth bows its knee.”

Here’s what Jesus is saying: When we follow Jesus, then we obey his call upon our lives doing what he asks and going wherever he sends us. When we do, he promises, we will experience life to the full. We receive the eternal life that the world is looking for. Now, until Jesus returns and completes his work in this world, we will experience persecution and difficulty. But we will not have to do it alone. We will have a big family -- the global family of God -- available to us. So, in this family, Jesus calls some, like the rich man and the apostles, to leave home and possessions to carry the gospel to the world. He calls others to live for him where we are but are to use what we have 1) to support those who come into our family and who have material needs and 2) to support those who go to other parts of the world to spread the Gospel.

So, for those of us in church today who have been blessed with possessions, know this: they are dangerous. They can weigh down your soul and keep you from God. But, they can be used to further God's work in this world. Part of the privilege of those who are blessed financially is the blessing of asking God, "Lord, how can I use those temporary things you've entrusted to me to bless my brothers and sisters in church? We must have our eyes open to look for the needs of our family members – and generous spirits to try to meet them. And, of course, one of the greatest privileges, when we have possessions, is to use what God has given us to support those who are sent out into the mission.

And for those who have come today who need the help of your church family, I'll talk to you at the end about the next steps you should take so that your church family can walk with you.

Right now, after these words from Jesus talking about us being a family, we will have what 1 Corinthians 11:33 speaks of as our family meal saying, "My brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together." We will go to communion together remembering how costly it was for God to adopt us into his family, i.e., the precious blood of Jesus...