

Week 33
May 3, 2009

Wealth and the Kingdom Way *Matthew 19:16-30*

A young man approaches Jesus. We find out later that he's wealthy. He seems to be honest and earnest. He asks questions that indicate interest in God and respect for Jesus.

First, he (we'll call him Richie) asks the big one: "What good things must I do to get eternal life?" It's a question that could have been asked by anyone in any day. In our day, people who don't know the Bible tend to assume that one good thing or a stack of good deeds is enough to gain heaven. Or else they believe that pretty much anyone this side of Hitler has eternity in heaven waiting, since "we're not so bad."

Jesus did what Jesus does. He gives Richie an unorthodox answer. "Only one is good." Don't merely read this on the surface. He's not simply saying, "I'm good, you're not," or even "God is good and you're not." Jesus is saying, here as elsewhere, that the key to heaven is a person, not a deed. One good person (himself) is the key to God's kingdom.

"But if you want to obey," answers Jesus politely, "follow the laws."

"Which ones?" asks the man, still thinking that heaven is earned by good deeds.

"The core commandments," says Jesus. "You know. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal or lie. Honor your parents. You know, love your neighbor as yourself."

"Yes, but what else? I do all of that, and I'm still not sure." And he probably did do them pretty well. And he surely was, rather wasn't, sure.

"If you want to be perfect (whole, complete, well, and mature), go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

Remember, we're off point, in a sense. Jesus answered the initial question about heaven by pointing to a person. Now we're on to something else. He defines obedience and perfection according to behaviors; indicating that, while our actions don't secure our place in the kingdom, they do contribute to our wholeness and completeness. In this case, Jesus suggests that by divesting his wealth and applying it to the poor, Richie would take a great next step toward wholeness. This act of generosity would even bring riches in heaven, which is Jesus' way of saying that heaven values that kind of extravagance and commitment. It is celebrated and even rewarded in heaven.

Does this mean that everyone should divest all their wealth and give it all to the poor? No. Jesus only gives one person that curriculum toward wholeness, though in Luke 12:32 Jesus urges his "little flock" not to be afraid. The Father has given us the kingdom so we don't have to be afraid to sell possessions and give to the poor and provide rich purses for ourselves in heaven that will never wear out.

One mistake that we make is to think that Richie is being asked to make a great sacrifice. We are better off assuming that Jesus is asking Richie to do something that will be good for *him and others*. It's very likely that Richie's life, even here on earth, would

have been richer if he's found the faith to break free from his riches. Those riches might even keep him out of heaven.

Why? For Richie, wealth is what keeps him from following the one person who has the keys to heaven. And he's denying himself the fellowship of the one person who can make our lives on earth most abundant and meaningful.

Our problem, of course, is that we don't believe that Jesus' way is the better way. We dabble and toy with Jesus, rather than going for the full immersion, because we're pretty sure that Jesus doesn't really know what would make us whole and complete. We construct model images of how our lives could be rich and good, and then ask Jesus to contribute and play along. He doesn't promise to bless that approach, but instead says that if we seek first the kingdom other things would fall in place, and that if we seek righteousness our lives would be blessed more than in the pursuit of riches.

Realize that wealth isn't the only issue that threatens to steal our affection and loyalty. Other things become objects of our faith and pursuit and take the place of God in our lives. Yes, money is a most common and fearsome bear trap hidden on the trail, and it will snare many of us. Money – rather, the love and pursuit of money, - will keep many from actually following Jesus and many more from following closely.

But for someone else, Jesus might have said, "Give your house to the poor and follow me. I'd like you to be mobile and to live more simply and freely."

To another, Jesus might say, "Give your job to someone else. I have other work for you."

To someone else, Jesus might say, "Lose the television. It's eating up our valuable time together."

To another, "toss the Blackberry." To another, "leave the bottle," or "throw away those pictures," or "clear out your wardrobe," or "junk the golf clubs," or "get off the computer." He might even say, "Let go of your obsession with privacy; I want you to live in community." Or to another, "Let go of your social schedule; I want to meet you in solitude without distractions." Or to someone else, "Why do your children run your life? They aren't God and it doesn't serve them to treat them as little gods. Don't sell them, or course ... but *let me be God!* Follow me, and I'll help you help your kids be the people I created them to be."

Hebrew 12 reminds us to lay aside every sin that so easily entangles us. What is sin? Anything that creates distance between us and God. Anything that flies in the face of our pursuit of God. Anything that steals God's authority and influence in our lives. These things entangle us, trap us, trip us, tackle us and keep us from reaching the goals. In some cases, they prevent us from growing and maturing and perfecting – from finding wholeness and wellness and completeness. In other cases, those entanglements prevent us from being obedient and God-honoring. In the worst case, our entanglements prevent us from knowing, believing and following the one who has the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus comes full circle. After starting with the person before the deeds, he now comes back to the person. "Follow me." But Richie couldn't, because the trap has set so deeply.

He can't, and he'll miss so much because he thinks he has so much to give up.

Oh, don't let this happen to you. Don't let it happen to me. I want to know him, follow him, obey him, love him, honor him, and be with him. Don't you? He's so good. He's so true. He's not lying to us and Jesus isn't nursing a weird fantasy. He is who he says he is, and he's inviting us into the best life and everlasting life. With him.

Lay down what you must. Sell what doesn't help you be who God hopes you'll be. Divest of those things and ways that misdirect your life investment. Get ready to travel light and enjoy an adventure with a Guide that you can completely trust. And go with Jesus.