

“The Opposite of Rich is . . .”

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Text: Mark 10:17-31

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Last month, on an occasion I had to teach the Bethany Sunday School class, we were discussing the concept of covenant. We spent time talking about what we can expect from God as God is faithful in covenant with us, and what God expects of us. Then we talked about our covenant as members of a congregation and again, what is expected of the church and us as individuals. What are the expectations – what are our responsibilities or commitments as people of God and as members of Christ’s church? How do we live in response to the life we’ve been given in Jesus Christ? What must we do?

A man comes to Jesus asking about things to do – but it was a different question. He wants to know, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now he’s not asking about what to do after he’s been baptized. Rather, he wants to know the shortest route to the baptistry. This man wants to know how to “get” eternal life – how to take possession of it. Now the man seems eager enough and quite sincere; he seeks out Jesus and falls on his knees. In Mark, he’s not identified as young as he is in Matthew nor are we told he’s a ruler, as he is in Luke. He’s just a man – a person like us – who, also like us, has great possessions. He’s apparently ready to do what it takes to get that eternal life.

Jesus responds by listing the commandments – don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t give false testimony, don’t defraud or covet, honor your parents. Now if you were paying attention, you counted only six commandments – where are the other four? Why would Jesus leave out 40 percent of the Ten Commandments? Jesus knows that the man knows the commandments – all ten of them, and the man says, “Yes. Been there, done that – since I was a teenager at Judea Junior High. I’ve kept every one of those commandments you listed.”

Perhaps Jesus didn’t mention the other four commandments because he was waiting to see if the man was honest with himself. You see, the six commandments Jesus listed are ones dealing with how we are to treat others; how we’re to live in community. The four he omitted deal with our relationship with God. Perhaps this was Jesus’ way of getting the man’s attention. It’s as if Jesus says: “These six are a piece of cake for you; those aren’t your problem. It’s the other four I didn’t mention and which you didn’t bring up – that’s your hang up.”

Jesus looks at him and loves him – the scripture says. Then Jesus drops the other shoe – “Show me what you’re made of. Show me you can love God as well as your neighbor by going and selling everything you have and give it to the poor and then come follow me.” In hearing what it would cost him to be a disciple, he slumps down and walks away sorrowfully. The way Jesus wants to go isn’t a way he wants to go and he walks away. Did you know this is the only call story in the gospel in which someone refuses to follow Jesus?

You know this story is often used as a way of condemning wealth and exalting poverty. That condemnation is bolstered by Jesus’ example of trying to fit a camel through the eye of a needle – it’s easier to do that than have a rich person enter the Kingdom. Yet this is not a wholesale putdown of the wealthy. It is, however, a powerful reminder that the Kingdom of God is not for sale. The poor cannot buy it with their poverty any more than the rich can buy it with their riches. None of us earns eternal life, no matter what we do. As one writer says: “We can keep the commandments until we’re blue in the face, we can sign our paychecks over to charities, and rattle tin cups for our supper without earning a place at God’s banquet table.” Neither wealth nor divestment of wealth saves us – only God does.

Eternal life – a place at God’s banquet table – it all comes to us as a gift. God bestows that grace upon whomever God chooses. The catch is – we have to be ready to receive the gift. We can’t be otherwise engaged. We cannot accept God’s gift if we have no spare hands with which to take it.

A while back I ran into Dillon’s to pick up a few things. I didn’t want to wheel a cart around and didn’t think I needed a basket. Well four aisles later, I was loaded down with stuff – one-half gallons of milk were on sale; so I had four of those (two in each hand), a 12 pack of diet coke under my arms, a loaf of bread, jar of jelly in the other hand – all the while trying to balance a jar of applesauce. I was doing okay, I wasn’t dropping anything. I was moving kind of slow and then I spotted a woman handing out free samples of a barbeque meat. Now you know me, I’m a sucker for giveaways – I wanted to try that sample, but I had no hands to accept it and that woman wasn’t about to feed it to me. Only after I unloaded my arms and hands was I able to

extend my hand to receive that barbeque beef on a cracker.

This man that stands before Jesus is loaded down. Now, as I mentioned earlier, it's not simply that he was wealthy. Jesus doesn't condemn the wealth and we shouldn't either. The problem is that the man is holding on so tightly to his wealth that he is a slave to it. He's lugging his possessions behind him like a ball and chain (know the feeling?). His wealth was supposed to make him free, but kneeling in front of Jesus he understands it's not so. He can't believe that the opposite of rich might not be poor, but free. He walks away from an invitation to follow Jesus, because you cannot follow if you're not free to go.

One pastor has described this story of the encounter between the man and Jesus as a healing story. She says, the man is possessed – but only by his possessions. Jesus is offering to free him of his possession, to cure him of his excess. But the rich man turns his back.

Now how would we respond if called upon to give up our material possessions? Most of us would balk, and for good reason. After all, is it wrong to have money to feed and shelter our families, to put our children or grandchildren through college, to pay our tithes and offerings to the church? I really don't think so. Having resources does not necessarily mean that our possessions are our masters or that we suffer from a consumerist addiction affliction. But Jesus knows this man has issues and tells him to give up what defines his life, and follow him. In this case, it clearly was the man's money and possessions that defined him, that told him who he was and how much he was worth. Jesus challenges the man to make an exchange: drop what limits him in exchange for what frees him.

I believe that's the advice Jesus has for each one of us. Break away – let go of – what defines us and limits us outside of our relationship with Jesus as His disciples. Only then will we be free. Whatever it is – possessions, popularity, sex. Drop it. Ditch it. Let go of it and follow me.

We cannot save ourselves with poverty or wealth. What is it to be saved? One theologian, Peter Gomes, puts it this way:

To be saved is to be freed from the bondage of human expectations. To be saved is to be saved from the demands of your own human ambitions, your impossible desires for self-perfection and cheap grace. To be saved is to be liberated from the domination of petty morality which is basically selfish and self-interested. To be saved is to realize that salvation is not a human enterprise but a divine activity. Salvation is God's work, and not ours. It is not the church, nor the company you keep that saves you, it is God.

With us, nothing works. The good suffer, the wicked prosper . . . . Our wealth does not make us rich, our poverty does not make us virtuous. Our power does not heal, our knowledge does not enlighten. Pleasure is fleeting, and the grave seems ultimate and eternal. The gospel of wealth, pleasure, power, and sensation has no capacity to save us for or from anything. With us, nothing is possible; nothing is possible, with us. But with God, all things are possible.

Years ago, my grandmother Engle was in charge of the Sunday School preschoolers. She called them her "little tots." She had an exercise she would do with the little ones using her hands. "Open, shut them, Open, shut them – Give a little clap."

If we live our lives with shut hands, with clenched fists, we are not able to receive gifts that God sends our way. We've got to open them and be able to receive. Once we've done that, then we will be free to share our resources with others.

The life of faith is lived not with clinched fists, but with open hands. We can't shake someone's hand if our fists are clenched. We can't give or receive a hug if our arms are full. You know, if we could earn our way into God's kingdom, most of us would do whatever we could to earn that place and be willing to pay an extremely high price. But friends, for most of us, the cost of eternal life is too high – it's free.

O God, give us the courage to answer the call of Christ – to come forth and follow. With you, there is risk and cost. Without you, there is nothing.

(Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for her insights into this text.)