

“THEN COME, FOLLOW ME”

Mark 10:17-31

Key Verse: 10:21

“Jesus looked at him and loved him, ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’”

In today’s passage Jesus teaches how to have eternal life, in response to a young man’s question (17). Jesus explains that gaining eternal life is equivalent to entering the kingdom of God (24). Having eternal life does not refer to living forever in this world. It is to enter a different world--the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is more than a geographical region; it is wherever God reigns. Where God reigns there is peace, love and joy; there is order and harmony, beauty and true glory. Whether we enter the kingdom of God or not is a most important matter, a matter of ultimate happiness or everlasting misery. Do you want to live in the kingdom of God? Really? The question is: how can we? There is a great contrast in this passage between a rich young man who failed to enter, and Jesus’ disciples who decided to follow Jesus. In brief, we need to be like the disciples. Let’s listen to Jesus teaching about receiving eternal life.

First, one thing you lack (17-22). Jesus started on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill God’s salvation plan. Suffering, death and resurrection were waiting for him. It was a serious moment, and Jesus’ heart must have been heavy. But he was always ready to welcome those who came to him. A man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him, asking, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (17) We don’t know much about this man, except that he had great wealth (20,22). Matthew adds that he was young and Luke that he was a ruler (Mt 20:22; Lk 18:18). He seemed to have it all: wealth, youth and power. Not many people attain this level of success, especially when they are young. He was the one percent of the one percent. Furthermore, he lived a good moral life, which is unusual for those who have all these things. Everyone surmised that he was happy and satisfied. To our surprise, he was not. He knew he was missing something. His action of running to Jesus and falling on his knees tells us that he was desperate. Perhaps he felt like another rich man, Solomon, who said, “Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (Ecc 1:2). In any case, he was crying inwardly. Why? It was because he had a soul that could not be satisfied with only the things of this world. Many young people these days seek wealth and fame

through social media, even if they must do unsavory things, ignoring truth and basic humanity. The problem is that after attaining all of this, they are not happy. They soon feel that life is empty and meaningless. Why? It is because their souls are dissatisfied. We should recognize that man is a soul with God-given desire for eternal life (Ecc 3:11b).

How did Jesus respond? When Jesus heard the words, “Good teacher,” and “what must I do” he immediately knew what the man’s problem was. Jesus saw right through his appearance to the condition of his heart. Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone” (18). This man respected Jesus on the basis of his moral goodness. In a similar way, he respected himself as morally good. But Jesus pointed out that true goodness can be found only in God. The standard of goodness is not human beings, but God. When measured by God’s standard, no one is righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10,23). For example, before meeting God, the prophet Isaiah was self-righteous and critical toward the corrupted world. One day he saw God seated on his throne, high and exalted, and heard seraphim saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Then he realized he was a wretched sinner before holy God. So he cried out, “Woe to me! I am ruined!” (Isa 6:1-5). When anyone meets the holy God, they realize they are terrible sinners. This young man’s problem was that he was not conscious of sin because he did not know the holy God. How did Jesus help him?

Jesus said, “You know the commandments: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother” (19). We might expect him to take some time to think about this. But to our surprise, he quickly declared, “Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy” (20). He was a remarkable young man. How could he say this? Most likely he had a form of legalistic righteousness. But he could not possibly have kept the spirit of the law, which Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount. Murder is not just an outward action but includes being angry or upset. Who can avoid being angry or upset? Adultery is not just an outward act but includes having lustful thoughts (Mt 5:21-30). Furthermore, Paul said in Romans 13:9-10, “The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Who can fulfill the law of love perfectly? Paul kept the commandments faultlessly in his outward behavior, but not in spirit. So he cried out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will

rescue me from this body of death?” (Ro 7:24) The function of the law is to provoke and expose sin so that we may cry out to God for mercy. However, hearing the law did not result in this young man becoming aware of his sin. How did Jesus help him?

Usually when we hear the boasting of a self-righteous person, we find it hard to bear. We just hope they will stop talking. But how did Jesus see this man? “Jesus looked at him and loved him” (21a). Jesus had great compassion on his suffering soul. Jesus said, “One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (21b). This was a specific call to discipleship to this one man, not a general call for everyone. Jesus’ approach is not the same for everyone. Jesus touches each person’s problem specifically, though his principle is the same. Jesus challenges each person to put God first in their lives and commit to him wholeheartedly. When God is first in our lives, we can use everything to serve him: wealth, power, talents, knowledge and more. Jesus’ call is in effect throughout one’s entire lifetime, not just during college days. When Jesus calls us as his disciples, he challenges us to sell everything that hinders us from following him. In this young man’s case it was his possessions that had become his idol. To others, it may be a person they love more than Jesus or their career, or human ambition to become famous in the world.

The 18th century evangelist George Whitfield once stayed in the house of an army general. This man had everything in the world: wealth, power, and honor; also, he was a man of integrity. But there was one thing he lacked; he did not know Christ. Whitfield was not bold enough to challenge him directly. But the night before leaving the general’s house, Whitfield scratched on the window in his room the words, “one thing you lack.” After reading this message, the general was convicted of his poor spiritual condition. Falling to his knees, he accepted Jesus as his Savior and followed him. Like the general, we need to decide to follow Jesus, leaving everything behind. As we continue to follow Jesus, we may need to sell one thing to keep following Jesus. Our father of faith, Abraham, made an initial decision to leave everything. But that was not his last decision. He also had to leave his son of the flesh Ishmael, and to offer Isaac back to God (Gen 12-22). What is one thing you need to sell? To me, it may be the dream of retiring honorably without the constant pressures of leadership. This sounds appealing at times. Yet I need to take up my cross and follow Jesus until he comes again.

Jesus promised the rich young man that if he sold everything to follow him, he would have treasure in heaven. Our treasure is what we value most. There are two kinds of treasures: earthly treasures—which are vulnerable to ruin and theft,

and heavenly treasures—which are everlasting. If we spend all our time and energy piling up earthly treasures, we will be like the rich fool in Luke’s gospel. He worked hard for an abundant harvest so that he could enjoy the rest of his life. He said to himself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.” But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.” Jesus concluded, “This is how it will be for anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God” (Lk 12:16-21). So Jesus exhorts us, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...” (Mt 6:19-20). We should invest boldly to store up treasure in heaven. How can we do so? John Wesley said, “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.” Wesley’s primary means of practicing this teaching was by preaching the gospel and raising disciples of Jesus. Sharing the gospel with one person and raising them as Jesus’ disciple is a great investment in heaven. As God’s people we should be rich in doing these kinds of good deeds. This is how to store up treasure in heaven. Yet we must remember that good works are not the means of salvation, but the product of salvation. We can do good only by God’s grace.

What is the treasure in heaven? It is Jesus himself. So Jesus said, “Follow me.” In what sense is Jesus a treasure? Colossians 2:3 says that in Jesus “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” In Jesus there is forgiveness of sins and true freedom, peace, and joy. In Jesus there is resurrection, living hope and eternal glory. In Jesus there is everything. But if we do not have Jesus, we lose everything no matter what else we may have. In Matthew 13:44 Jesus told the parable of the treasure hidden in the field. When a man found this treasure, he was full of joy and went and sold all he had and bought that field. Innumerable people have found Jesus and been willing to sell everything to follow him. This is the way of eternal life.

What was the rich young man’s response? Verse 22 says, “At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.” He wanted to keep his earthly treasure and gain eternal life at the same time. Jesus did not give him this option. A clear decision to follow Jesus was required. When the man could not put Jesus first, he could not have Jesus at all. Realizing that he had forfeited the greatest treasure and chosen a perishing one, he became very sad. He knew it was the wrong decision. But he could not help himself. He had been caught by greed. Some of us know how to catch a monkey. It is by putting a banana in a jar with an opening just big enough to allow the monkey’s hand to reach in. When the monkey grabs the

banana, he cannot get it out of the jar. If he just let's go of the banana, he can run free. But he cannot let it go because of greed and is captured by the hunter. We should not be like this monkey. We should not hold anything so tightly that it hinders us from following Jesus. Corrie Ten-Boom said, "I have learned to hold all things loosely, so God will not have to pry them out of my hands."

Second, blessings for those who follow Jesus (23-31). As the man was walking away, Jesus looked around at his disciples and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (23) The dominant Jewish view of that time was that riches indicate God's favor (Ps 128:1-2). Jesus' teaching seemed to be the opposite. So the disciples were amazed. Jesus continued, "Children, 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" (24-25). Jesus called his disciples children because he loved them, and they belonged to him. Also, they needed to grow spiritually. They should not be fascinated by people like the rich young man. Rather, they should be shepherds who understand the challenge that wealth presents. Jesus compared the rich entering the kingdom of God to a big camel going through the exceedingly small eye of a needle. This indicates that handling riches is incredibly challenging. Many Christians want to be rich, thinking they will serve God more effectively. This is reasonable, but it does not account for greed. Once God blesses them financially, money easily becomes their idol. Anyone who becomes rich needs great faith, like Abraham, Job, and David. These men knew that all things come from God, and they were just stewards. They knew how to spend money wisely for God's glory. They were not slaves of money. Rather, they ruled over money with faith. Jesus did not teach that wealth is evil, or that poverty is better than riches. Jesus did not teach that only the poor can be saved. Jesus did teach that discipleship is costly, and that wealth is often a hindrance to following him.

When the disciples heard Jesus' teaching, they were even more amazed. They said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" (26) Seeing their gloomy faces, Jesus said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" (27). Salvation is possible only with God, not with man. Throughout history, many have credited human goodness as a basis for salvation. They try to be good people, hoping that if their good deeds outweigh the bad, they can be saved. As noted, John Wesley did many good works in the name of Christ. But on his deathbed, he realized that his good works were like dirty rags before God. Only Jesus could qualify him for heaven, through his blood shed on the cross. The point is that salvation is impossible by our efforts. Only God makes salvation possible

through Jesus who died for our sins. Salvation is totally by God's grace; it is the gift of God (Ro 6:23b; Eph 2:8).

Hearing Jesus' words, Peter was very encouraged and blurted out, "We have left everything to follow you!" (28) Peter realized that he was not like the rich young man. By God's grace, he had left everything and followed Jesus. What would happen to him and the disciples? Jesus promised: "Truly I tell you, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life" (29-30). Here Jesus summarizes the cost of discipleship and its benefits. Jesus requires first priority, regardless of what needs to be left behind. Following Jesus is costly. However, as we follow Jesus, he will surely bless us in this present age--a hundred times more than what we leave behind. Notably, we become members of Jesus' family. We enjoy a fellowship in Christ that no one in the world can experience. At the same time, persecution comes. Anyone who turns toward Jesus and away from the world reveals the superiority of Jesus to all things people love in the world. This is why persecution naturally comes to them. If there were no persecution, we would be happy. But persecution also has a good purpose. God uses it to purify our faith and refine our character so that we may grow to be like Jesus. Jesus' disciples are most blessed, in this life and in the age to come.

In this passage, we can find a sharp contrast. The young man had many good things that he could enjoy in this world. But because of his love for wealth, he could not follow Jesus and forfeited eternal life. He could not empty himself due to his greed, so he lost the most valuable thing. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples emptied themselves to follow Jesus. Then God filled them with abundant blessing in this age, and eternal life in the coming age. Emptying oneself for Jesus and his kingdom is not a losing business at all. It is the way to gain everything. It is the wisest way to invest our lives. Many people think that as we accumulate wealth, we will be happy. But that is not true. Rather, when we empty ourselves more and more, then God fills us accordingly. Charles Spurgeon said, "Your emptiness is but the preparation for your being filled, and your casting down is but the making ready for your lifting up." We can experience this only when we practice Jesus' teaching. Jesus finished with a warning: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (31). We should not be self-righteous, or complacent. We should always be alert to live for Christ and his kingdom. As we follow Jesus, emptying ourselves, God blesses us with treasures in heaven. This is the way of eternal life.