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By Glenn Jordan

Introduction

The familiarity of the story of the Rich Young Ruler can dilute the radical dimension of the call Jesus issues to him. Jesus gently but firmly challenges the basis upon which the man has acquired his wealth and points him towards the need to deny himself in order to enter back into community. So profound is the change required that Jesus speaks of it in terms of a healing.

Jesus calls the man to dismantle the very system from which he has derived his privilege, by selling everything and giving it away to the poor (the ones that perhaps he has previously defrauded). Then follow. This is the way to treasure that will last. It is the way of gift and not merit. And it is worked out not in esoteric theological hair-splitting, but in treating one's neighbours with justice and fairness. This is perhaps why it's only the relational commandments Jesus quotes.

Text

Mark 10:17–31

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “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.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus

looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

28 Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,” 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Comment

This is such a familiar story to many that it's hard to imagine it throwing any new light. But sometimes it may be that our very familiarity with it means we miss what truth lies on the very surface.

The rich man rushes up to Jesus in some state of urgency, falls to his knees and asks a rather unusual question. It would be easy to be critical of this wealthy man and his request for information on how he might ‘inherit’ eternal life. It has often been said that the use of the word ‘inherit’ betrays his misunderstanding of the Kingdom. His is a world of male entitlement. Be born in the right place to the right family, attend the right schools, and marry the right woman and all these things will be given to you. All the power, privilege and access you desire.

Jesus recognises that the question of how you acquire any asset is what is at stake here, and he reveals the answer to the man in a devastating way.

First he says, “You know the commandments!” but he only lists those with relational and ethical dimensions not the theological ones which speak of the nature of God. And he changes the last one slightly. Instead of “do not covet” Jesus says “do not defraud.” This recalls Lev 19:13 which says, “Do not defraud or rob your neighbour. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.” I wonder is this a hint from Jesus that he knows how this man got his wealth?

Then, having heard the man’s assertion that he has kept all the commandments (and we have no reason to disbelieve him—after all, he has come to Jesus because of a nagging awareness that despite keeping the commandments there might be something else). And Jesus nails it. To the man who has everything, Jesus says, “there’s one thing you LACK.” It’s not that he needs something in addition to what he has already acquired. It is the confirmation that even what he has is not enough. And more than that, he must divest.

Jesus calls him to dismantle the very system from which he has derived his privilege, to sell everything and to give it away to the poor (the ones that perhaps he has previously defrauded). Then follow. This is the way to treasure that will last. It is the way of gift and not merit. And it is worked out not in esoteric theological hair-splitting, but in treating one’s neighbours with justice and fairness. This is perhaps why it’s only the relational commandments Jesus quotes.

The man has surely practiced a form of personal denial, but he has done so out of obligation, because of rule and instruction, the following of which would then entitle him to something. Jesus issues a challenge to practice a form of denial which brings him into relationship with others, relationship which will cost. This is denial because of love which is the true discipleship way.

It is surely significant that Jesus says “Go!” a word used elsewhere in Mark’s Gospel in the context of healing. For the embrace of a new ethic of wealth and of grace, the shedding of old ideas and practices of merit or entitlement require a form of healing, not just a lifestyle choice.

Response

In his book “Say to This Mountain: Mark’s Story of Discipleship” theologian and activist Ched Myers challenges the reader to reflect on how easily we can be ‘possessed by our possessions.’ He says it is a form of addiction from which we need to recover. He says one of the distinguishing characteristics of wealth is the capacity it affords us to make decisions about our lives and those of our loved ones. And that a minority of the people of the world get to make the following choices. He urges the reader to reflect on them in the context of our own lives. Have we ever had the chance to choose:

- where I will live?
- how I will earn a living?
- where my children will go to school?
- what I will wear today?
- whether I will eat today?
- where I will eat today?
- where I will sleep tonight?
- whether I will heat or cool my home?
- whether I will get medicines which have been prescribed?
- whether I will have a telephone?
- where I will go on holiday?
- how I will make my home more comfortable or beautiful?
- whether I will own a car?
- what to do with my inheritance?

Spend some time reflecting on your response to these questions, and on the fact that for the vast majority of people in the world these are not choices they can make.

Is there a way you can live more ethically, sustainable and fairly in the world this week? If yes, what will you do?

Prayer

God of all power and resource
Forgive me for being blind to my wealth
And for living ignorant of my sense of entitlement.

Create in me a purer heart
One stirred to action by grace and gift
Rather than privilege and merit.

Heal me of my addiction
To power and possessions

And strengthen me to live
the form of costly relational life
Which brings me to the Kingdom.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Exclusion and Prejudice