

Sell and Give
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Today's command is a challenging one indeed. How is it also liberating? How does it fit with Jesus' words: "For my yoke is easy and my burden light."?

Ministers can sermonize on money in a way that lays a heavy burden on parishioners. That is not my goal today.

Here is a command that applies to *churches* as well as individuals. Sometimes it is the church that withholds its treasures from the poor, that keeps on building bigger barns, to use the image of another story, of the Rich Fool. Oral Roberts University built a 50 foot statue of praying hands. Grady Nutt the famous Baptist humorist quipped that when a Cadillac drove up, one hand went like this (palm out for contributions).

Doug Marlette, the former political cartoonist for the *Charlotte Observer* sometimes pricked the conscience of the church. In one cartoon he depicted a poor Jesus in ragged robes saying Sell and Give to the Poor. Opposite him was a well robed minister holding his cathedral-like church in his arms, holding it away from Jesus and his words.

Grace Baptist's long-term commitment to give 20% of its budget to missions is evidence you are trying to listen to the words of Jesus.

So today, let's listen again.

I

In the opening scene a young man called the Rich Young Ruler, came to Jesus and knelt before him. It was an act of worship, but as we shall see, it is easier to worship Jesus than follow him. As Jesus said, "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my *Abba* in heaven." There's a lot more "Lord Lording" going on in this world than doing the will of God.

"Good teacher," the young man said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus' reply is startling: "Why do you call me good? There is no one good but God." Here is the amazing modesty of Jesus who recognized that while he was God's son he was not God. Chevy Chase used to open his skit on Saturday Night Live with the words, "I am Chevy Chase and you are not." We need the modesty of Jesus to say "God is God and I am not."

II

Then the main question of the text: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus had more in mind for us than our getting into heaven—though life forever in God, with God was part of what he meant. What he had in mind was becoming part of God’s life in the world, starting *now*.

In answer to the man’s question, Jesus said, you know the commandments:

You shall not commit adultery

murder

steal

bear false witness

defraud

Honor your father and your mother.

The man replied, “Teacher, I’ve kept these from my youth.”

Then Jesus looked at him and loved him, loved him, and said

You are very close. One thing you lack. Sell all you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

When the man heard Jesus’ words, he became sad because he was very rich.

It is one of those clear moments in the gospels when someone decides *not* to follow Jesus. Sometimes when the gospel is preached people grow sad and walk away.

III

Jesus then said to the man:

How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!

Indeed 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.

Or to put it another way: It is easier for a Mercedes to go through the night deposit slot of Bank of America than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

The disciples this time get the point “Then who can be saved?” they said. Jesus replied, “What is impossible for [us] is possible with God.”

The history of interpretation of this saying is an anthology of evasion, scholars trying to soften Jesus’ sayings. One attempt: If you change one vowel in the Greek word “camel” you get “rope”. Surely Jesus meant it is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God!

From the ninth century comes this interpretation. There was a gate in the wall of Jerusalem called the Needle's Eye. It was smaller than the rest, too small for a camel to get through upright. But if you took the cargo off and if the camel got on its knees, it could wiggle through! So, this interpretation goes, if you are lowly and humble enough you can get into the kingdom of God!

But these interpretations miss the point. Entering the kingdom and being saved is always a miracle. The truth is, we can't catch up and go with Jesus in the world apart from a miracle of grace. The miracle is letting go of whatever we're holding onto that keeps us from following Jesus, from living freely and joyfully and whole.

For the rich young ruler it meant giving up his allegiance to his wealth.

Jesus does not give us a new legalism. Take Zaccheus for example, the rich tax-collector. He gave up *half* of his money plus reparations for those he had cheated, and Jesus said, "Today, salvation has come to this house!" Walter Rauschenbusch father of the Social Gospel movement in America said about this moment: "A camel passed through a needle's eye, and Jesus stood and cheered." Did the rich young ruler get a bad deal? He had to give it *all* away!

Following Jesus means *change*, but not the same change for everyone. For Peter and Andrew, it was leaving their fishing nets and following Jesus on the

road. For Matthew it means giving up his job at the tax office. For Mary Magdalene it was letting go of seven demons. For Judas Iscariot it was giving up revolution against Rome—maybe he never did. For some it was leaving one prophet—like John the Baptist—to follow the prophet who was the Savior of the world.

But the command is here for us to reexamine our relationship to wealth and to the poor. There are different responses from the early church, Barnabas sold a piece of land and gave it to the church. In the church in Jerusalem they shared their wealth in common so everyone had enough. In most early churches an offering for the poor was taken every time they had worship.

Today if you join the Church of the Savior in Washington D.C. you tithe your income, but that's not all. You pledge on a regular basis to befriend the poor. Live your life with the poor so as to become friends.

IV

Perhaps what Jesus is asking of us is to give up our attachment to money. In I Timothy 6:10, Paul writes:

For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.

Have you ever felt those pangs? I have. Note, he does not say *money* is the root of all evils, but the *love* of money, our attachment to it.

Jesus is a master psychologist when he says:

No one can serve two masters, for a person will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money (Matthew 5:24).

Jesus' command is liberating because we can live as a divided self, and Jesus wants us to be divided no more. There are of course many different attachments that can keep us miserable. And Jesus wants to free us from those attachments so we can live joyous, free and whole.

V

So let me close with some reflections on ways to hear Jesus' command in our lives today

1) You may have very little to sell and give to the poor. But you can invest your life, your time and talents in helping the poor our community and world. Or, you may invest your life in changing public policy so that our policies help and do not harm the poor in our land.

2) There's a hymn that says that Christ gives "The laboring conscience peace".

Where does Jesus need to give your laboring conscience peace, and where does he need to prick our all too comfortable conscience?

3) What attachments do you have that are keeping you miserable? What do you need to let go of so you can live freer, more joyfully and more whole. Anne Lamott says everything she has let go of have claw marks on them. There may be initial resistance, but on the other side is joy and lightness of heart.

4) Don't try to imitate another's discipleship. Jesus is not asking you to imitate someone else but to follow him and take the yoke he has fashioned just for you. For St. Francis it was a literal following of this command. He gave up all his wealth, married "Lady Poverty" as he called it and was free to spend his life serving the poor. His movement is alive and healthy today.

For some it may mean choosing a vocation that may not make you wealthy but is engaged in helping others.

For some it may mean reshaping your vocation so it better serves others.

We are not called to imitate the Saints, but to be inspired by them.

5) “One thing you lack”, Jesus said to the rich young ruler. Is there one thing you can identify today that is dogging your heels and keeping you from living fully, freely and whole? Keeping you from following Jesus?

6) There is the outer voice, the voice coming from outside us which is the divine voice, the voice of Jesus, the voice of scripture and there is the inner voice, the inner voice of God, the Christ within, the Teacher within.

We can listen to the outer voice, but when it comes from only outside it is but a new legalism.

We must let the outer voice sink deeply within until it meets the voice of God within, the Christ within, the Rabbi within.

When these two voices meet, it is like the meeting of two rivers. Things click into place. You find your groove. What you feel is not a *pushing* but a *drawing*. Do you feel the difference?

There is no command of Christ that is not meant for your joy, your freedom, your healing, your wholeness. Don't stop listening until you find it. Wait for the outer and inner voices to meet, then go, sell, give and follow.

Epilogue

What happened to this man? Jesus clearly loved him and wanted him to be a disciple. Jesus told a parable about two men. One said Yes to Jesus but then said No. The other said No to Jesus, but later said Yes. George MacDonald suggests the hope that this rich young ruler who said no, later said yes. I love the thought of that, for it gives hope to all of us who have ever said our nos to Jesus. It's never too late to say yes.