

Sermon ✝ October 10, 2021

Mark 10:17-31

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We are all familiar with the stereotype of the self righteous, Bible waving evangelist who confronts you with the question, "*Sister or Brother are you saved?*" But in Mark's gospel we are presented with an opposite picture. Jesus . . . a reluctant evangelist.

He is just setting out on a journey when he is interrupted by a man asking the question, "*What must I do to be saved—to inherit eternal life?*" Not only did the man pose the question but he prefaced it by saying, "*Teacher you are good.*" Now Jesus disowns this tribute to his righteousness, accepts no accolades, and responds, "*Why do you call me good? There is no one good but God.*"

We all need to remember that our Lord refused to claim any unusual attributes of character. He did not take a self-righteous stance. He also appears to brush the salvation question aside saying, "*Why ask me? You know the commandments—do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false evidence, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.*"

It's interesting to note that the commands that Jesus cites are from the second Table of the Law, which emphasized social obligations and human responsibilities. This reply should have assured the man. It was no attempt to threaten the enquirer or make him anxious or ashamed.

And even though Jesus was not pursuing the enquirer, not pushing the salvation question . . . still the enquirer pursued Jesus and replied, "*But Master, I have kept all these since I was a boy.*"

At this point a marked change occurs in the dynamics of the encounter. Jesus looked straight at the man and his heart warmed toward him. Some translations say simply "*He loved him.*" In the words of contemporary therapists we could say, "*Jesus had an unconditional positive regard for him.*"

In this context of affection Jesus reverses his role, takes the initiative and says to the man, "*You lack one thing. Go, sell everything you have, give to the poor and come, follow me.*"

It is at this point that the enquirer, who has persistently pursued the question of his salvation, responds in a very different way. His face falls. His heart becomes heavy. And he goes away sorrowful because he has great possessions. Suddenly, he is not as interested in his salvation as he appeared to be.

He suspected that he could and should be doing more but he lacked the faith and the trust to go all-out. The disciples were puzzled and perplexed.

What had happened? They were approached by this upright man who was very intent on living a more religious life. It was the man himself who had sought them out and raised the question of his salvation. Jesus had clearly been impressed by him and even invited the man to join them. Then, suddenly, the man turned away. Why? What had caused things to go awry?

The two requests that caused the faithful enquirer to falter were: 1. that he give away all that he had and, 2. that he follow Jesus. It's clear that this is the way Peter heard the dialogue for he responds to Jesus by saying, "*We have left everything to become your followers.*"

For Christians, the context and climate in which we hold our possessions is to be the context and climate of giving. There are numerous times that scripture reminds us . . .

- † The small boy understood this when he heard the disciples puzzling aloud about how they would be able to feed the crowd of five thousand people and he spontaneously offered them his small basket of loaves and fish. When Jesus blessed these gifts the crowd did eat and had food to spare.
- † The woman understood the call to give when she broke open her bottle of very costly perfume and anointed Jesus. After rebuking her critics, Jesus declared, "she has done a beautiful thing to me."
- † The widow understood the call to give when she gave her small mite because it was offered not out of her abundance but out of that which she needed for her own survival.

In the parable of the last judgment, it is those who have been giving to the thirsty, the hungry, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned who are welcomed into the kingdom of God.

When the man in today's lesson turned away, he became a warning to all of us . . . that the more we have to hold and to hoard, the harder it will be for us to move on to a higher stage of living and to consider all that we have as an undergirding for better giving.

When Jesus wanted to make sure that his disciples would remember how much he loved them he said, "*This is my body which is **given** for you.*" Not only does Jesus provide us with a supreme example of giving but the extent to which Jesus blesses giving done in his name is absolutely astounding!

It was over a hundred years ago the Reverend William Parsons wanted to give children he had worked with on the lower East Side of New York City a chance to see the beauties of his new Pennsylvania Parish. He began the *Fresh Air Fund* and that summer seventeen New York City children were the summer guests of his parishioners. Since Reverend Parsons began giving New York City children Fresh Air vacations, over 1.8 million children have participated.

Christine Morelli, a former Fresh Air child and executive at Parade magazine wrote, "*The Fresh Air Fund softened the edge of a tough life in inner city kids and gave us an opportunity to explore a totally contrasting world. We came away with a sense of hope.*"

In 1877 when Reverend William Parsons arranged for those first seventeen children to vacation in Pennsylvania, he did not have the faintest idea that so many people would be following his example for the next hundred years, nor that more than nearly 2 million children would benefit.

This serves to remind us that we ought never to refrain from giving because we assume that our gifts can do little to meet a huge need, for God may one day bless our giving far beyond our expectations.

In trying to understand why the man turned away, we cannot help but feel that he did not adequately value the invitation to come and join the followers of Jesus. He had not yet felt the blessing of the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. He did not understand the value of the opportunity that Jesus was giving him.

Jesus had offered him an exchange. In place of the support that he felt from holding great possessions, Jesus offered the support of a caring love that believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things, and never fails.

May it be so for us . . .