TO INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE

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.’”

Ever since they confessed their faith in him as the Messiah, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the cross he would soon take. And it wasn’t just his cross; he was calling them to deny themselves, take their own crosses and follow him. But the disciples didn’t like it. They had their own ideas about what Jesus should be, and each dreamed that he would be the greatest. They wanted a political messiah with earthly power and glory, and they each expected to be at least a cabinet member in his glorious kingdom. But Jesus is the spiritual Messiah in a spiritual kingdom and came to be the most humble servant of all.

In the midst of this struggle, today Jesus encounters an unusual man. Jesus not only tries to help him spiritually; he also uses this as a teachable moment for his disciples. Jesus is still inviting all of us to follow him. But we learn through today’s passage that often, things in our lives are hindering us from following Jesus. We each need to think long and hard about what Jesus is calling us to do, and we each need to make a decision. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Just before this, people had been bringing little children to Jesus for him to bless them. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God belongs to those like little children. He said that those who won’t receive the kingdom like a little child will never enter it. Look at verse 17. Evidently this man heard Jesus’ words and is worried. He isn’t sure that he’ll have eternal life in God’s kingdom. He’s so serious that, as Jesus is leaving, he runs up to him and falls on his knees to ask him about it. He says, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Is he really in trouble? What kind of life has he been living? According to verse 20, he’s been living a morally upright life, keeping God’s moral laws since boyhood. According to verse 22, he has great wealth. Matthew 19:20 tells us that he’s a young man. Luke 18:18 says that he’s a ruler. So he’s known as “the rich young ruler.” What a guy! Most people gain power and wealth only *after* they’re too old to really enjoy it. But this guy’s got it all *now*: power, wealth *and* youth. So what’s he so desperate about? Why is he running up to Jesus asking about eternal life instead of running after a pretty girl or enjoying his life at the top? Obviously his great wealth and position didn’t satisfy his soul. He’s already tasting the meaninglessness of life in this world, and he’s longing for something eternal, something to make his life significant. Many young people today are pursuing a career that will guarantee them a materially comfortable life. Some have the life motto: “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” Some secretly would like a position of power. Many teenagers and young people in college are asking the questions: “What’s the point of it all? What am I going to live my life for?” It’s hard to find a satisfying answer. So, many settle for a life of survival. They just want to live comfortably and enjoy, even though it’s all pretty meaningless. The zeal and passion of youth morph into middle-aged quiet despair.

How does Jesus respond to this unusually desperate rich young ruler? Notice what he first says. Read verse 18. Why does Jesus engage him in a discussion of what is good? Is Jesus just trying to be humble? No, he’s trying to point his attention to God. Only when we start thinking about God, about who God is and what he’s like, can we start to find answers to life’s biggest questions. But there’s more. Jesus wants him, in light of who God is, to start getting to know himself. Knowing oneself is also at the heart of finding life’s answers. So many people are pursuing life goals without really knowing God or themselves. Needless to say, such goals turn out to be unfulfilling at best.

Now let’s look at what else Jesus says to the man. Read verse 19. Why does Jesus suddenly start talking about the Ten Commandments? It sounds so boring. But it’s to answer his question. Jesus says, “You know.” All good Jews knew the promise that by keeping God’s commandments, one can gain life (Lev18:5; Ro7:10). To have eternal life one must keep God’s commandments. It’s nothing new. But Jesus is not just trying to dismiss his question. He’s trying to help the man reflect on his relationship with God and on who he himself is, in light of God’s commandments. Look at verse 19 again. We notice that Jesus omits the commandments that pertain to God and only mentions the ones that have to do with our fellow human beings. In other words, Jesus is inviting this man to review honestly how he’s been treating other people throughout his life. As we look honestly at how we treat others, we can come to know ourselves.

How does the man respond? Read verse 20. Clearly he hasn’t thought about it very deeply. He’s only thinking about keeping the commandments outwardly. Outwardly he’s never murdered or committed adultery or stolen or given false testimony in court or defrauded or dishonored his parents. But Jesus views the commandments on a deeper level. He once said that anybody who looks at someone lustfully has already committed adultery of the heart. Anybody who’s been angry at someone has already committed murder of the heart. As we may know, in the Ten Commandments, the ones that have to do with our fellow human beings can be summed up with the command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (12:28–31; cf. Lev19:18). It’s not about violating rules, about getting away with doing the bare minimum; it’s about the motivation of our hearts. Jesus immediately could see that, basically, this man has been living his life centered around himself. He has no idea how far short he falls of God’s standards. He has no idea of who he really is before God. He thinks he’s good. So he doesn’t understand why he has no conviction about his eternal standing with God.

In verse 20 the man sounds pretty self-righteous. But how does Jesus respond to him? Look at verse 21. It starts out by saying, “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” It’s the only time in Mark’s Gospel that it literally says that Jesus “loved” someone. Really? That guy? Some people hate the rich. But Jesus loved this rich young man. Jesus saw how sincere he was, and how serious about finding the answer to the most important question in life. Jesus could have judged him as rich, proud and self-righteous, but instead, Jesus loved him. He saw him with deep compassion and gave him some “tough love.”

Let’s read verse 21. Jesus says here, “One thing you lack.” What was the one thing this man lacked? As we think about the words in this verse carefully, it seems to be “treasure in heaven.” This rich young ruler had many treasures on earth, but no treasure in heaven. He was materially rich but spiritually poor. This is why he feels so desperate. It sounds familiar to people in affluent societies.

Jesus really wants to help him have treasure in heaven. How? He says, “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Jesus is giving him a really big challenge. He’s challenging him not just to get rid of his possessions in order to deserve God’s favor, but to totally reorient his life. It’s a challenge to no longer live for himself but to center his life on Jesus. If he were to make Jesus the center of his life, and following Jesus his top priority, he would have to learn how to depend on God and how to share his possessions with the needy. Nobody ever follows Jesus in a vacuum; what we do with our material possessions and how we treat our fellow human beings are directly related to following Jesus. If we truly follow Jesus, we learn to depend on God, care for our fellow human beings and share our possessions. Many people hoard their wealth and material possessions. People get crazy over silly material things that in the end don’t even last. Many try to live self-sufficiently through having an abundance of wealth and material possessions. But Jesus calls us to radical change, a life of depending on God not on ourselves, a life of loving God and loving others, not a life of self-love. As we learn how to depend on God, how to love God and love others, Jesus says we store up treasures in heaven.

Look at verse 21 once more. This is not just about becoming a generous philanthropist like a few billionaires seem to be doing today. Jesus isn’t just calling us to give to the poor. He says, “Then come, follow me.” Jesus is inviting this man to be one of his disciples. He’s inviting him to get close to him, to grow in a personal relationship with him, to come to know him better. He’s also inviting him to share in the mission God has given him, to bring the good news of God’s grace to all the people of the world. It’s the greatest, most significant life there is, to follow Jesus. Jesus is still saying to each of us, “Then come, follow me.”

But what does it really mean to “follow” Jesus? Obviously nobody is literally following a human Jesus around anymore. To follow Jesus means to learn of him, to learn his humble, compassionate heart. It also means to share in his mission and in his sufferings. And it means to follow those who are following Jesus, to learn from someone who’s been following Jesus and living for him (1Co11:1; Php3:17). Making Jesus the center of our lives is hard. It goes against the grain of our sinful nature. It goes against the values of the world. It disrupts our whole lifestyle. But as we learn to follow Jesus, we begin to live the most meaningful life we could ever live.

How does the man respond to Jesus’ challenge and invitation? Read verse 22. Clearly, his great wealth was like an idol in his heart. This is the point: not that wealth is bad, but that it can become like an idol to us. The man loved his great wealth more than the truth, more than God himself. Whatever we love the most becomes like a god or idol to us. Often we’re not even aware of what we really love. For some of us, it’s our wealth. It may be people in our lives. It may be our plans or our careers. But Jesus is calling us to love him most, and to prove it not by our words but by our choices and how we live.

Read verses 23–25. Jesus repeatedly says that it might be hardest for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Why is it so hard for them? It’s because the pull of money and wealth is so strong. When we’re suffering and poor, we’re more likely to put our hope in a better promise of God’s kingdom. But when we’ve got it all and can enjoy it right now, it’s hard to take God’s kingdom seriously. It’s hard to let go of the world. Jesus wants his disciples and us to see the world with a kingdom perspective, with the right values. He wants us not to envy people who are materially rich, but to see how spiritually poor they tend to be. How do the disciples respond? Read verse 26. Jesus has just challenged their whole way of thinking. The Jews thought that the rich are the ones who have God’s favor, God’s blessing, and so they should be first in line to inherit God’s kingdom and be saved. But if what Jesus is saying is true, the disciples are wondering if anyone can be saved.

What does Jesus say to them? Read verse 27. This is Jesus’ faith. It says he “looked at them and said…” What is impossible starts with the disciples. It seems impossible for them to be changed from their fixed ideas. But Jesus believes God can change them. It may seem impossible for people with great wealth to let it go and follow Jesus. But Jesus believes God can change anyone’s heart, even people too engrossed in this world to ever change, even the most stubborn people. Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Look at verse 28. Peter suddenly makes an exclamation. He’s stuck on thinking that hardly anyone will inherit God’s kingdom. When he saw the rich young ruler fail to accept Jesus’ invitation, he felt so much better than him, because he and the others, though not as rich, had left their fishing business and all they had to follow Jesus. He wanted some reassurance from Jesus that all their sacrifices were not in vain.

How does Jesus respond to him? Read verses 29,30. Clearly it’s not just about money and material things. It’s about priorities. Who or what is most important to us? Many people put their money first. Many people put their family first. Many put their jobs first. But Jesus calls us to put him first. He calls us to live for him and for the gospel. It requires sacrifices. Jesus lived with this priority. He put gospel ministry ahead even of his own family (3:31–35). His disciples paid the cost to live for him and for the gospel. Many Christians in history made painful sacrifices to live for Jesus and the gospel. There’s no such thing as Christian life without sacrifices. Nobody “has it all”—the world *and* Jesus.

But Jesus’ point isn’t about the sacrifices but about the reward. He says those who sacrifice to live for him and for the gospel “will receive a hundred times as much in this present age.” Then he lists “homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields.” He’s referring to the new spiritual family we gain in Christ. Their homes are our homes. They become dear spiritual brothers, sisters and mothers. They’re willing to share with us. He also mentions “persecutions.” Is that a reward? If so, why does it happen? We’re persecuted because as we make following Jesus our first priority, our family and former friends become angry and try to change our commitment back to them and to their values. But in the age to come, Jesus says we receive eternal life. It’s the best reward ever. Jesus makes these promises to us. To follow him we need to believe them. Read verse 31. Jesus is saying this first of all to Peter. Peter boasted about the sacrifices he’d made. But Jesus is saying here that in God’s kingdom, God’s grace rules. God loves to show grace to the least deserving. And those who are self-righteous about who they are or what they’ve done may find themselves last in his kingdom. In following Jesus, we need to learn how to live by God’s grace alone.

Today Jesus is asking us, “What is your treasure? How serious are you about following me?” May God grant us a new decision to accept his challenge.