

Mark 10: 17-31

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This question is the question of all questions. There is no greater question that anyone could ask. The enemy that we all face as human beings is our mortality. Although we don’t like to think about it too much it’s always there in the background, and there is nothing we can do about it. But is there any hope beyond death? This the question this man is asking. And so, as we work our way through this passage let’s see if Jesus has an answer to this man’s question.

It all begins with a man coming to Jesus and kneeling before him. Right from the very beginning by this very action we can see that this man has something on his heart. Something very deep is troubling him. This also becomes clear in the way that he addresses Jesus. “Good Teacher”, he calls Jesus. Any pious Jew would never call any person “good”. Only God is good. Jesus is quick to point this out. But the mere fact that this man did call Jesus good, may tell us of something of the esteem that he had for Jesus. The belief that with Jesus he may find the answer to his question. **“Good Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17b)** I wonder, what sort of images and thoughts float into your mind what you hear the words, eternal life? It’s all about going to heaven after we die. Isn’t it? Well, actually, no it isn’t. Heaven is not the picture that would have been in his mind when we came to Jesus with this question. Many first century Jews had a particular vision and hope for their immediate future and this hope was not about going to heaven. Rather they hoped for, dreamed of, prayed for a decisive act of God that would make everything different. They longed for a great event to happen which would bring about justice and peace, freedom for Israel, punishment for evil doers, and a time of prosperity. A time when, all the righteous dead would be raised to new life. That here the expression “eternal life” is synonymous with the Kingdom of God. A better translation might be “the age to come”. And so, the question that would have been on the mind of this man would have been how can I be sure that I will be one of those who will inherit “the age to come”? Now in this time this was quite a common question. The Jewish law itself defined Israel as God’s people (everyone knew that), And if you were part of God’s people then, naturally, you would have a place in the age to come. But there was a problem; Israel, as the prophets pointed out, was full of sinners. The nation therefore was compromised. How could you tell if you really were part of God’s people? This is the man’s question. He is looking for a more precise understanding of the Jewish law so that he could be sure that he was really part of God’s people, and, therefore have a place in the age to come. Now at the time of Jesus there were many factions within in Judaism who thought they had the answer. We can think of the scribes and pharisees that we meet in the gospels. The normal answer at this time they would have given would have been to give their own detailed interpretation of the Jewish law claiming that this is the correct understanding of the law and then they would have urged you to join their group. If you belonged to the “right” group, you could enjoy the security of knowing that you would inherit the age to come. It’s worth keeping this in mind when we look at how Jesus responds to this man’s question. What was Jesus’ attitude going to be to the Jewish law and what sort of movement might he be leading? And Jesus’ reply is a puzzling one. He begins by restating some of the basic commandments. It’s interesting to note that he chooses those commandments that relate people while omitting those that relate to God. Now this is not at all what this man would have been expecting. He would have been expecting Jesus to give some tighter definition of the law to keep or some extra observance that he could do. He is not satisfied with Jesus’ answer, and he responds with the words, **“Teacher, I kept all of these things since my youth.” (Mark 10:20)** You can almost hear the doubt in his words.

For a moment there is a glimmer of hope, for he has lived a life following these commands of God. But as he says the words a sense of doubt rises to overwhelm the hope. Somehow Jesus' answer didn't fully satisfy. It didn't bring the assurance he was hoping for. What about one's duty towards God? - The first four commandments. You shall have no other gods but me. You shall not make for yourself any graven image. You shall not take the name of the Lord God in vain. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Then we are told that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus saw the sincerity of this man. He saw right into his heart. Jesus then said to him, ***"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."*** (Mark 10:21) Here Jesus goes to the heart of the matter, but he does so in a rather puzzling way. This man is wealthy, but what he has done is to make his wealth an idol. He is in breach of the second commandment, "You shall have no other gods but me." Here Jesus introduces a radical rethink on what putting God first and not taking his name in vain might mean. "You shall have no other gods before me" and "you shall not take the Lord's name in vain" now means: ***"Come follow me"***. "You shall not make for yourselves or worship any graven image" now means: ***"Go sell what you own and give it to the poor"***. That what we see quite clearly is that Jesus' new movement is indeed a radical revision of what it means to be God's people. The way now to be part of God's people is to follow him. Because of Jesus a whole new world opens up. The age to come that the people of the day looked forward to coming in the immediate future; but still in the future, has through Jesus burst into the present. ***"Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand"*** Jesus is saying that wealth won't buy you a place in the age to come or the kingdom of God. Now that call, "come follow me!" echoes down through the ages and everyone will be judged by the answer they give. But this answer for this man was too much. For the man was very rich. And he went away grieving. Here we have a picture of a man who longed indeed yearned for something, for eternal life. But ultimately in the end could not pay the price that was asked of him. -A man who trusted more in his possessions than in Jesus.

Here we are reminded just how radical the call to follow Jesus can be. As Christians we are called to follow Jesus. And this calling will involve sacrifice. -The laying down of our lives. This sacrifice will vary from person to person. Thomas Aquinas said that there are four major obstacles that keep people from following Christ. They are wealth, pleasure, honour and power. For this man it was his wealth. For us it might be something else. Jesus then turns to his disciples and says, ***"How hard it is with those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God"***. (Mark 10:23) The disciples were amazed by this. They probably believed the popular notion that wealth was a sign of God's blessing, and that poverty was a sign of God's curse. But Jesus sees wealth as a hindrance, for it breeds a false sense of security. And it's often the cares of this world and wealth that take people away from the Gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that, *Our hearts have room only for one all embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord.* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) For this man his wealth proved to be an obstacle. We need to be asking the question of what might be the all-consuming thing in my life that hinders my walk with Christ?

But I wonder if most of us are so freaked out by Jesus' words . . . ***go sell what you own, and give the money to the poor***, that we fail to hear the rest of this verse, ***and you will have treasure in heaven*** Now Jesus here is not talking about rewards stored up waiting for the day you go to heaven to enjoy. You don't have to "go to heaven" to enjoy the treasure. It's a bit like putting money in the bank. We don't have to go to the bank and spend it there. Rather treasure in heaven is like an investment that can be drawn on to advance the kingdom of God.

Its benefits can be ours in this life and can also be ours in the next when the kingdom finally comes in all its fullness. Jesus explains its meaning a little later in this Gospel when he says,

“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, who will not receive a hundred fold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.” (Mark 10: 29-30)

That the benefits of what we invest in the kingdom of God through the sacrifices we make result in the growth of the kingdom itself, but they also flow back to us. There is the reward that awaits us at the end but also there are the rewards we have now. There is assurance of knowing God's love, through having that peace of God which passes all understanding. There to is the reward of being part of God's family. -Discovering new relationships in the body of Christ. Sure, it costs, but the rewards are even greater.

Finally, what Jesus reminds us of in this Gospel is that salvation is ultimately a gift from God and it's not something that we can earn. That here we are faced with a paradox. On the one hand Jesus seems to be saying that it's easy to enter the kingdom of God. All one needs is a childlike attitude. ***“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:15)*** All we can do is to be like children and accept the gift that is offered to us. But on the other hand, it's difficult. ***“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.” (Mark 10:24-25)*** I guess what he is saying is that it is hard to be like children and not trust in wealth. What we have here is the great paradox of salvation. On the one hand it is a free gift. All we can do ask for it, to reach out and accept it. And yet on the other hand it will cost us everything. It will cost us our very lives. But it's worth it. For when we meet Jesus we find "that pearl of great price." we discover the greatest prize of all. -A prize that is worth any cost. You see that's what the rich man turned down. He turned down Jesus' invitation to know and to encounter him. Jesus would have dealt with that nagging fear that was plaguing him and given the gift of eternal life. But in the end that man went away sorrowful. He chose to live with that nagging fear and doubt along with his riches, rather than to trust Jesus and to follow him. The real question we are left is, where have we placed our trust? Is it with Jesus or does it lie elsewhere?

Rev Bruce Richardson