

How Can I Do This?

Mark 10: 17-31

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**February 16, 2014
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Once, Jesus was setting out on a journey when a man ran up, fell on his knees before him and asked, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Immediately, we realize that the man was urgent. We later learn that he was very wealthy. This makes his actions all the more remarkable. He put aside all pride in his position to show respect to this rabbi from the rural north named Jesus. He wanted to be sure that he would be with God always. But this was more than just trying to get an insurance policy about the next life. The phrase “to inherit eternal life” had implications for today as well. The man wanted to be sure he was living life *now* in accord with God’s will. He wanted to connect with God in a way that was vivid and life-giving from this moment into eternity.

Immediately, though, Jesus slowed the man down. He deflected the man's opening flattery. “Why do you call me *good*? No one is good but God alone.” Strict Jews reserved the title of “good” for God. But the Greek culture of the time might use such a phrase liberally for esteemed teachers. Using these words, the man showed high reverence for Jesus in a culturally sophisticated manner. Jesus, however, took the opportunity to turn the attention from himself to his Father. He wanted the man to think as a simple Jew, not with the spirituality that was in vogue.

Jesus first answered the man's question with a standard instruction in piety. The way to a life of blessing, as everyone knew, was through keeping the law. “You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.’” This is an interesting list. All but “Do not defraud” are taken from the Ten Commandments. And these are the easier, more obvious of the commandments for a decent person to keep. Jesus’ list is about avoiding wrong behavior, but it doesn’t say much about how to satisfy the hunger in our souls.

This list is like answering the question, “What does it mean to be a Christian?” with the reply, “Oh, you know, read your Bible, go to church, do unto others and try to be a good person.” Those things are all part of being a Christian,

but they don't get down to the essence.

The nagging doubt, "Is this all there is? Shouldn't I be feeling more?"

What an insightful teacher Jesus was! He threw out a stereotypical answer to smoke out how earnestly the man was seeking. If this wealthy man merely had been a superficial seeker, simply wanting a stamp of approval for the way he was living, Jesus' answer would have been enough. He could have gone away, left in his self-satisfied shallowness. But a person with a restless soul could not easily accept that list as adequate for eternal life.

The man replied: "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." The implication was that he was not satisfied with standard religious observance. The man had lived a good life; he had been a good guy, one who did the right thing, but he needed more. This man was not the younger brother type who went off and squandered his inheritance; he was more like the older brother who stayed home and did what was required of him. Yet, he felt a lack in his soul.

Today, he would be someone who often has been in the church, no stranger to the language of faith. We could meet him in the pews. For instance, this could be the man who works hard during the week, comes to church on Sunday, sits respectfully, and has the admiration of his peers. He ushers now and then, goes to a Bible study, maybe serves on a committee, and generally contributes his share of time and money. Usually, everything is fine but, once in a while, comes the nagging doubt, "Is this all there is? Am I doing the right thing? Shouldn't I be feeling more?" The question of meaning arises. He wants to know more about what he needs to do in order to live as one passionately related to God.

Or, this may be the woman who has helped out at church in all the required ways. She has taught Vacation Bible School. Every week, she has dressed the children and gotten them to church in the typical Sunday morning mad dash. A hundred covered dishes have been received from her hands. When the prayer chain called, she prayed. Once a year, the circle met at her house. All these things she has done since her youth. And, still, she feels there is something missing. What else should she do?

One Thing You Lack

When the man had implied his dissatisfaction with standard religious observance, Jesus evidently was moved. Mark records this wonderful line: "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Of course, Jesus loved everyone he met. But articulating his love in this moment meant that something in particular had touched

Jesus. The man's honest searching evoked Christ's affection. This feeling of love suffused Jesus' words in the next moment.

He spoke to this man with the hope of meeting his need: "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." For the man who had everything, one thing was missing – giving away what he had. What he lacked was not doing something more or obtaining something else; he needed to clear out some of what he had. His stuff was in his way. So, Jesus asked him to orient his entire life radically toward others.

It is important to realize here that Jesus' advice, as wild as it sounds to our ears, was even more astonishing in the culture of first century Judaism. This episode preceded the development of the Christian belief that poverty is a virtue of spiritual vitality. Rather, people felt that riches were a sign of God's favor. Having a lot meant blessings had been given in reward for righteous living. Of course, giving a tithe had been part of that culture, as well as the understanding that one should be open-handed toward the poor. But giving up everything would have been like tossing God's blessings back at him, a sign of disrespect. The man would have been making himself like the unrighteous and the unblessed; all signs of spiritual achievement would have been relinquished.

Looking at him, Jesus loved him, then asked him in love to strip himself of all signs of God's favor. He was to start again. Emptying out, not achieving more, was the way to inherit eternal life. Selling it all in order to bless the poor would clear the way to connect with God through following Jesus.

The Way of a Child

It is no coincidence that this story immediately follows the story of the blessing of the children. Previously, people were bringing their small children to Jesus in order that he might touch them and give them a blessing. The disciples didn't like all this crowding, and tried to send the people away. But Jesus rebuked them. He said, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." Then, he took the children in his arms and blessed them.

Emptying out, not achieving more, was the way to inherit eternal life.

Once again, this story predates our culture. Judaism had not passed through a cycle of the adoration of children and the elevation of their needs.

No cultural esteem for the innocence of childhood had made Jesus' words sentimental or even particularly welcome. Children were loved, of course, but economically they were unimportant. They could not achieve or produce. Children only could receive what was given. So, evidently, the Kingdom of God – this life of connectedness to all God has for us – is a gift for those without sufficient claim to it. And, in fact, all assertions of worthiness become a hindrance. The kingdom comes by grace alone.

The crux seems to be our sense of *possession*. The child may partake of all his or her parents have. Every blessing and provision, every privilege, may be bestowed before any merit can lay claim to earning such abundance. The child may enjoy the parents' resources, but the child does not have legal entitlement, may not buy or sell at will, and may not supplant the parents.

When we are stripped of claims of achievement and worthiness, then we are open to receiving all. If we think we have leverage on God to demand a blessing, then we are blocked from it. If we feel we have enough on our own to satisfy us, we will know want in our spirits. If we hold to what we have as our own, then our dear heavenly Father – to open our eyes to the truth and for the good of our souls – will ask for it to be handed over. He will demand that we shift our focus from what we have accumulated to how we may give it to those in need. This outward movement will clear out room in our souls for the eternal life, the living water and festive abundance, with which God will fill us.

If we feel we have enough on our own, we will know want.

Costing Not Less Than Everything

We are blocked ... not because the Father will not give, but because we will not release.

The heart of this passage is that Jesus, who came to give us his life, does indeed ask us for something. He asks for ultimate allegiance. He wants God his Father to be at the center of our being. Control is released into the hands of God; will is surrendered. My way must give way to God. T. S. Eliot has written that such simple relinquishment at the heart of our life with God is a “condition of complete simplicity/costing not less than everything.” We have uncovered the great paradox of the Christian faith. God desires to give us everything. God demands that we give up everything for him. When we hold on to what we have in defiance of what God requires, we stay disconnected and cut off from the way of true, eternal life. When we are stripped of all achievement, when the hand opens and lets control slip away, then –

and only then – does God respond with the gift of all things. So often, we are blocked from a life of connection and joy, *not because the Father will not give, but because we will not release.*

Of course, no one wants to do this. It seems against all reason to let go of what we have in hopes of what an invisible God may give. The man in the story, who came with such high hopes, could not immediately accept Jesus' words. Mark tells us: "Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." Precisely what he possessed blocked him. The man was sad. Was he grieved because he knew that the whole of his young life had been spent managing his position and wealth? Was he sad because he soon would be giving up all he had both inherited and worked for? Was he astonished that all these years he had focused on the wrong thing? We do not know if he later took Jesus' advice or not.

But we can sympathize with his difficulty. We may find that we are so enmeshed in our way of life that change seems nearly impossible. Though we are lonely for a connection to God, old loyalties keep a grip on us. We feel locked into the expectations of our current lifestyle. So many people would be disappointed if we radically changed our life focus. Furthermore, it goes against our grain to have to count our achievements in the world as gaining no purchase on God's favor. We strive to be worthy of love and, yet, Jesus tells us that such pretension to worthiness only blocks us from receiving the worth the Father will confer upon us. This undoes all our usual patterns. Moreover, control of one's affairs, taking charge, being the captain of the ship, making our own way – all are prized by our culture. How could Jesus ask us to give these up? Surely, he is not being literal about this?

We cannot say exactly what he asks of each person. It very well may be a literal giving up of things we prize more than God. It could be particular possessions or fanatically following a sports team. It could be keeping up the appearance of our home or climbing after success at work. It could be a particular lifestyle or an addiction to following a financial market. It could be that he asks for none of these things. Following Jesus does not necessarily mean entering a lifestyle of material poverty, or even entertainment deprivation. What he asks for, however, will be that which is keeping us from eternal life. He will want whatever has kept our focus on ourselves and not others. He will call us to an out-turned life that flourishes in caring for the needs of others. He will urge us to release whatever we have been using as a substitute for the true God of the universe. He will not let us make ultimate anything but himself. He desires to save us from all these little gods

who inevitably disappoint us.

The possibilities of what he may ask for are frightening. This is particularly true if we know little of Jesus and have little reason to trust that a relationship with his Father will fulfill us. Jesus seems willing to take the risk that we will turn away from his demands. With the rich young man, Jesus went right for the heart. He did it in love, but he was no less demanding for his compassion. He wants it all. He insists that we meet him as children. We are simply asked to receive what he gives us in love. We cease to insist that we have earned anything. We dismiss the stories we have composed of our worthiness before God. We gamble all on Jesus' willingness to take us in his arms and bless us as he did the children, and then send us into the life he has for us.

Jesus' striking teaching may tempt you to go away disappointed, just as the man in the story did. You had hoped, perhaps, for something less invasive, something more fulfilling along the lines of what you always have believed makes for the good life. This story of Jesus can feel intolerable. In fact, the disciples were amazed, too, asking, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

No one is so enmeshed in their present pursuits that God cannot release them. No god to which we have sold our souls has authority over our Father in heaven. He has the power to transform us. He can help us let go of those possessions and habits, memories and lifestyles that seem to have such a grip on us. Our role is to take the step toward him in faith, opening our hearts and our hands as we release our lives into his care. A Methodist prayer of dedication makes a great way to close:

I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt:
Put me to doing: put me to suffering:
Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee:
Exalted for thee, or brought low for thee:
Let me be full, let me be empty:
Let me have all things: let me have nothing:
I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Thou art mine and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth let it be ratified in heaven.