

A SAD STORY  
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in Brookfield, Connecticut  
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Text: Mark 10:17-27

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “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.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

The gospel story this morning asks us to see ourselves in this man who comes to Jesus asking about eternal life. Mark tells us he’s rich and has many possessions. And yet his actions tell us something is still missing from his life. He runs up to Jesus, kneels down in front of him and says, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

I’m not sure he even knows what that means. I’m not sure he knows what he’s asking for. He seems to think eternal life is something you get as a reward for checking off all the boxes on your spiritual to-do list. But Jesus takes him seriously anyway. He sees that his heart is in the right place even if his understanding is a little bit thin. He sees that he has a genuine hunger for a deeper, fuller relationship with God.

So, Jesus answers the man’s question. He says, “You know the commandments,” and then

he rattles them off: you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, etc., etc.

The man says, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

“Great,” Jesus says, “Then there’s only one thing left for you to do.”

When the man hears that, he’s probably thinking Jesus is going to give him maybe one more rule to follow, one more box to check off, but nothing major. Basically, he’s expecting a pat on the back for a job well done.

He’s in for a little bit of a surprise. Jesus doesn’t connect the question of eternal life to keeping the commandments. He connects it to money—although for anyone who’s been paying attention, this really isn’t anything new. A good chunk of his preaching has dealt with money and specifically the idea that attachment to money is a spiritual impediment. It holds us back in our

relationship with God. But apparently the man hasn't been paying attention because he's shocked when Jesus tells him the one thing left for him to do is to give up all his wealth.

But that's only the first surprise in this story. The second surprise is the way Jesus looks at the man as he's telling him this. Jesus looks at him and loves him—but not in a gentle, soothing kind of way; and certainly not in a way that shields him from the harshness of reality. No, Jesus loves him by confronting him with the truth and making him see who he really is and what his priorities really are. As much as he may hunger for a deeper, fuller relationship with God, he's not willing to part with his money in order to have it. When it comes right down to it, that's where his heart really is—with his treasure.

It's a tough love kind of approach that Jesus takes—something not many of us are good at, maybe because we have this idea that Christian love is about giving people what they want and making them happy rather than giving them what they need to grow in their faith. Jesus shows us a love that's more demanding, a love that won't settle for shallow comforts, a love that holds people accountable for their own spiritual lives. He loves the man by putting the responsibility for his relationship with God squarely onto his shoulders. He tells him the one thing he needs to hear, even though it's hard—the one thing he needs to do in order to open his life completely and wholly to God. Jesus loves him by pushing him toward maturity.

But that's all it is—a push. It's not a shove. Because Jesus also loves the man by giving him the freedom to say no, the freedom to shut God out of his life completely, the freedom to build his life around other things if that's what he wants to do. Jesus loves him even as he's walking away. He loves him by letting him go. He loves him by leaving him to wrestle with his own incompleteness, his own emptiness, his own sadness. And that's the biggest surprise of all—the fact that that's ultimately what this story is about: sadness.

Yes, it's about money. Yes, it's about love. But mostly it's about sadness—the inescapable sadness and sorrow that eats away at all of us

when we allow anything to come between us and God. That's why the man goes away grieving. He's being asked to move beyond his carefully constructed world. He's being asked to strip himself of all his accomplishments and put his trust in God alone. He's being asked to change his whole way of living—to go from self-reliance to God-dependence.

But he can't do it. He just can't do it. His wealth, and all the security and status and comfort that comes with it, is just too important to him. He can't imagine living without it. He can't imagine any other way of being. But the second he makes his choice, a profound sadness comes over him, a sense of loss and mourning, because deep down he knows what he's walking away from—the only true source of joy and fulfillment that any of us can ever have.

**T**his is a story that won't let us off the hook. This is a story that makes us do some real soul-searching. This is a story that leaves us to wrestle with our own incompleteness, our own emptiness, our own sadness.

We can't help but see ourselves in this man who has so much and yet is still missing something; and we can't help but wonder what we would do if we were in his place. Would we turn and walk away from Jesus? Would we go back to checking off boxes on our spiritual to-do list—going to church, listening to sermons, but not really letting any of it sink in, not really making any changes in our lives, and never really feeling any different—never really satisfying our hunger?

Or would we grab on to the life that Jesus is offering us? Would we grab on to it with all of our might, even though it means letting go of everything else we've tried to build our lives around: money, possessions, security, status, comfort? Would we give up everything that's holding us back in our relationship with God?

This story makes us think about that—whether we like it or not.

I have a pastor friend named Mark, who's retired now, but he used to be head-of-staff at a big Presbyterian church in Lexington, Kentucky—very historic, very wealthy, lots of old

money. I was talking to him last week about this reading, and he told me that one time he was leading a Bible study on it, and afterwards a guy came to see him in his office and said, “Mark, I’m not coming to anymore of your Bible studies. That was the last one.” Mark asked him why, and the guy said, “Because you make me feel guilty.”

He was one of the richest people in the congregation.

After he left, about five minutes later another guy came in and said, “Mark, from now on I’m coming to all your Bible studies. I’ll be there every week.” Mark asked him why, and the guy said, “Because you make me feel guilty.”

He was also one of the richest people in the congregation.

Our annual stewardship campaign is going to be starting soon. A lot of people don’t like annual stewardship campaigns for the same reason they don’t like this reading—because they make them feel guilty. I don’t want to make any of you feel guilty. But I do want all of you to grow in your faith. I do want all of you to have a relationship with God and experience the only true source of joy and fulfillment that any of us can ever have.

That’s my job, as a pastor.

That same friend of mine told me another story last week. One year, around stewardship time, another very wealthy person in his congregation came to him and said, “Mark, it’s not your job to raise money.”

Mark said, “Really?” because he kind of thought that was his job.

The guy said, “No. Your job is to tell me that I need to give money.”

That pretty much sums up what stewardship is about. There’s an old saying: “Stewardship is not about the church’s need to receive. It’s about the giver’s need to give.” Stewardship is not about supporting a budget. It’s about grabbing on to the life Jesus offers us and letting go of everything else. It’s about moving beyond our carefully constructed worlds, putting our trust in God, and embracing a whole new way of being. And the way we learn to do that is by giving—giving our money, but not only our money. We

also need to give our time, our energy, our creativity, and simply our presence—whether it’s here on Sunday morning, or at a Bible study, or at a committee meeting, or at a concert. Just showing up is a way of giving. It’s a way of saying yes to the life Jesus offers.

So, you’ll be hearing more about stewardship in the coming weeks, and as we go through this season, I encourage you to keep thinking about this story and what it says to you. Amen.