

## ***“What do I need to do?”***

**October 11, 2009**

*Text: Amos 5:6-7, 10-15, Mark 10:17-31*

### I.

If you knew what God’s will was for your life—what God wanted you to do—would you do it? Even if it ran totally against the grain of what your life had been up to that point?? Would you do it? Would you trust God to that extent?

Or would it depend on what it was that God was asking you to do? And if it were something that caught you off guard, something you were not eager to do, would you want to take some time to think about ... and calculate the pros and cons.

What the question becomes is: are we willing to subordinate our will to God’s will?

This is the challenge of the parable this morning of the Rich Young Man.

In the parable, a rich young man seeks Jesus out and, kneeling before him, he asks him a BIG PICTURE question. A BIG PICTURE question is a question that sees the inter-relatedness of all things. How everything fits together, what’s really important. His question?

### ***What must I do to inherit eternal life?***

Whoa! That sort of stops us in our tracks. This is not a question we ask casually. ***What must I do to inherit eternal life? What must I do to be alive to the promises of God? What must I do to truly be the person God wants me to be?***

This is a question about the deepest meaning of life, the deepest purpose. The young man must have been thinking about this for some time.

At first glance, he gives every appearance of having his life together. He seems successful and accomplished; and yet, there must have been a nagging uneasiness in the man’s soul, a restlessness. Clearly, something is lacking in his life. Why else would he come to Jesus with such a question?

### II.

As a Rabbi and teacher, Jesus’ response to him is in the context of the law:

*You know the Commandments, Jesus says. Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t bear false witness or defraud anyone ...and honor your father and mother.*

Without hesitation, the young man responds, *Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.*

In other words, he's been good and upright, obedient and faithful. He seems to *have it all* and we would think the blessings of life would radiate in his spirit. But then again, why has he come to see Jesus?

Jesus, then, says 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 and follow me.***

What utterly shocking advice! Who would have anticipated such a stunning response? And Mark's gospel says, *When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

However, as the implications of this parable settle in, the rich young man is not the only one who is shocked. The disciples, too, are in shocking disbelief at Jesus' words. And then Jesus says to them:

***How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!***

Then, confusing them still further, Jesus goes on to say, **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.**

By now everybody around Jesus is perplexed. What are they to make of that? Finally, one of the disciples—most likely, Peter—asks, out of deep frustration: ***Then who can be saved? Look, we've left everything to follow you.***

The disciples, understandably, are frustrated. As followers of Jesus, what have they signed up for? And Jesus' further words are not much help: about how *for mortals, it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.*

### III.

As a whole, this is a lot to absorb. But let's slow things down here and take a deeper look. Before Jesus offers his utterly deflating words of counsel to the rich young man about *selling everything he has, giving the money to the poor* ...and right after the young man's confident response about how he's kept all these commandments since his youth, Mark's gospel says, ***Jesus, looking at him, loved him ...***

The point, here, is that what Jesus says this to the rich young man, he says through the eyes of love. He doesn't just offer this advice casually or as if it were his standard, scripted answer to questions about eternity. It's as if his answer, through the eyes of love, is crafted especially for this young man.

Jesus is not talking to anyone else at this point.

- He's not talking to his disciples.
- He's not talking to the poor or the destitute in general.
- He's talking to this particular rich young man.

Jesus is somehow able to see deeply into the young man's heart and spirit and see him as he truly is. Jesus is not impressed by all the earthly credentials and achievements. In fact, from Jesus' perspective, they're the problem. They're keeping him from becoming his true self.

***And Jesus, looking at him, loved him ...*** and then he tells him what he tells him. But the larger point is that Jesus sees him as he has never been seen before.

Love has a way of seeing what is totally unique to its purposes; and those who love us most see us best.

#### IV.

Looking at the young man through the probing eyes of love—a love that sees the BIG PICTURE of the young man's life—we have to keep in mind, again, that the young man, of his own volition, sought Jesus out. Clearly, something was missing in his life.

So, we might ask, what might his life had been like? Certainly, he'd experienced a lot of success. But his whole social world had been about acquiring possessions and building up wealth. That's what his life had been about. His riches had been a core element in his identity ... to the point where, understandably, he couldn't imagine his life apart from the riches. No doubt he'd attended the Temple on a regular basis, been active in the community, been a good husband and father, but still—something was missing.

It's Jesus' assessment that his problem is precisely his attachment to his wealth and possessions. The man is not free.

He's not free to be alive to the Spirit and alive to love and, therefore, alive to the fruits that the Spirit and love offer. It's the Spirit and the fruits of love that lead to eternal life.

How can the young man come to know the fruits of the Spirit when he's so weighted down by all his stuff—his possessions, and his attachment to them.

***What do I need to do,*** he wants to know?

Well, Jesus is telling him. *You gotta free yourself of all your stuff! You're way too weighted down. Therefore, Jesus is saying, get rid of it ...give it away ... and then you'll be truly rich ... and then, come and follow me.*

## V.

As far-out and shocking as this is, isn't this good advice? Isn't this counsel precisely what the rich young man needed to hear?

His initial question of Jesus was, *what do I need to do?* Something was missing in his life ... some key element, key awareness—*something*. *What do I need to do?*

What do I need to do to feel a closeness to God—a closeness, too, to my brothers and sisters and to my fellow human beings? What do I need to do to feel like I'm doing the right thing with my life, living my life in ways that honor and glorify God and that reflect God's purposes for my life?

No matter who we are, don't we all wonder—at times—am I living the life God wants me to live? Am I doing things, saying things, making decisions—however large or small—every day—that are fulfilling God's purposes for my life?

### **What do I need to do?**

Am I making good use of my God-given gifts and talents? Good use of my time? Good use of my opportunities to serve and to make the world—my community, my family, my marriage—to make them all better?

It's normal, certainly human, to want to know *how we're doing*. *What do I need to do?*

## VI.

As a postscript to the parable of the **rich young man**, let's consider what might have happened to him afterwards as a sort of *epilogue* to the parable.

Keep in mind that, although he left in shock and grieving over his attachment to his possessions and wealth, he didn't leave without a greater sense of self-knowledge. In fact, he left with a fresh glimpse of what *eternal life* calls for.

And although he walks away crestfallen, he doesn't leave without hope. Jesus has given him insight into himself that is potentially life-changing. Who knows what choices he might make after a few weeks at home to reflect and mull things over?

Indeed, there is no reason why we can't assume that Jesus awaits his return.

And there's hope for us, too, in the parable—that we'll do what we need to do?

1. That we'll detach from things we need to detach from ... things that undermine our best ... our busyness, perhaps ... our excesses in ambition and ego.

2. That we'll let go of the things we need to let go of—the guilt, the resentment, the bitterness, the negativity that grates on our spirit and wears us down.

Always, there's hope—that we'll accept that we're forgiven and understood ... and freed, therefore, from whatever bad tapes of our past; whatever poor self-image that we inherited; whatever dysfunction that was passed on to us; whatever tragic things have happened to us—freed from it all.

God, in Jesus, looks into our hearts and spirits, each one, and loves us, just as Jesus loved the rich young man. For what God wants is the best for us ... that each of us might live lives that are alive to God's presence; lives where, everyday, we open ourselves to the tug of the Spirit and to love ... so that we might do as the 1 Timothy exhorts us to do ...

... and *take hold of the life that really is life*. Take hold of it! The *life that really is life*.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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