

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 6, 2010**

THE DISCIPLES' INHERITANCE

Mark 10:17-31

I want you to think of this passage as a kind of symphony in three movements, or a stage play in three acts. It really consists of three separate but intertwined parts:

1. Verses 17-22: Encounter with a Rich Man
2. Verses 23-27: The Problem of Wealth
3. Verses 28-31: The Disciples' Inheritance

Peter, the main focus of our series, does not come into the picture until the third act or movement. But we need to take time to look at the first two movements, in order to gain insight and learn the life lessons Jesus has for us there.

ACT ONE: ENCOUNTER WITH A RICH MAN

So, let's begin with Act One. It is a familiar story. A famous story, even though the man who came running to Jesus is never named. The story is found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, as well as the account we read here in Mark's Gospel. Matthew tells us that he was a "young man" (19:20). Luke describes him as a "ruler" (18:18), which means he was a local official of some kind. All three of the Gospel writers indicate that he was rich. He had great wealth, which can be either a blessing or a curse. Or both at the same time.

It is a story with a hopeful beginning but a sad ending. The young man came to Jesus with great enthusiasm. He did not come reluctantly. He did not come hesitantly. He was not being forced to come against his will. He came running to Jesus with a burning question on his heart. "What must I do," he wanted to know, "to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17).

He wanted to know how he could be sure of a place in God's heavenly kingdom. It is a good thing to be concerned about, don't you think? It is good to think about eternity, because this life isn't all there is. One of my doctoral classmates, David Nelson, did his thesis on a Puritan pastor and theologian named Thomas Boston, who observed that our life in this world is only "a short preface to a long eternity." So it is wise to think about eternity and to prepare for it.

But, for all his enthusiasm in coming to Jesus, this rich young man made three mistakes. His first mistake was in thinking he had to *do* something to *earn* eternal life. He is not alone in thinking that, of course. This world is full of people who think that by doing acts of mercy and living morally upright lives and giving to ministries that help the poor, they can *hopefully* earn a place in heaven. If you are among those who think this way, I hope you will see clearly today that you can never earn your way to heaven. And you don't need to.

The second mistake this young man made in his conversation with Jesus was in thinking that outward obedience to God's law was enough to satisfy God. He thought he had kept all the

commandments since he was still a boy (10:20). But Jesus saw into his heart and recognized this young man had failed to keep the very first commandment of the law, the commandment which says: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). His wealth had become his god. His possessions had become idols. Instead of possessing his possessions, his possessions now possessed him. It is never a good thing when the love of things takes control of a person’s heart.

His third mistake, of course, was to reject the counsel of Jesus. Jesus diagnosed the young man’s spiritual condition with precision and prescribed the exact course of action needed to overcome it. Jesus knew this young man could not serve two masters. He could not live for God and live for his riches at the same time. He would have to make a choice. Just as you and I must daily choose whom we will follow, whom we will worship and serve with our lives.

The Bible says that this young man turned and went away from Jesus with a sad heart. He was filled with sorrow that Jesus wanted him to get rid of his possessions in order to follow Him (10:22). As Jesus rightly recognized, his attachment to his riches and his reliance on them for his security and well being were a huge stumbling block that prevented him from receiving the gift of eternal life.

He didn’t have to go away sad. He could have gone away with peace and joy in his heart, if he had said yes to Jesus. He had come to Jesus wondering what he could do to inherit eternal life. He went away sad after Jesus exposed what he couldn’t bring himself to do.

There is a certain irony, and a spiritual lesson, in the fact that this wealthy man went away sad. Isn’t wealth supposed to make you happy? Isn’t that the message our culture gives us 24/7? But Jesus wants us to understand that there are some things money cannot buy. Eternal life is one of them. You can’t buy peace with God. You can’t buy a place in God’s kingdom. It is not for sale. You can only receive it as a gift. With a childlike, trusting faith, as Jesus said in Mark 10:15.

What good is it to be one of the richest people in the cemetery, if you die without ever receiving the gift of salvation through faith in Christ?

ACT TWO: THE PROBLEM OF WEALTH

Act Two in this passage involves Jesus’ discussion with His disciples in verses 23-27 about the problem of wealth and the impossibility of salvation, not just for the rich but for anyone, apart from the sovereign and gracious work of God.

At one level, Jesus is saying that no one who trusts in their wealth or riches has any hope of heaven. A few years ago, investor Warren Buffett, one of the wealthiest men in the world, announced that he was going to donate the vast majority of his fortune to several charitable foundations. Commenting on his plans, Buffett said: “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.” With all due respect, Mr. Buffett, you’re wrong. You cannot

buy your way into heaven. And anyone who is counting on their riches to get them to heaven is going to be disappointed.

When He says in verse 25 that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus is not saying it is *difficult* for a wealthy person to be saved. He is saying, from a human perspective, it is *impossible* (10:27).

I do not believe Jesus means that being rich all by itself disqualifies a person from God's kingdom. If it does, we're all in trouble. We may not consider ourselves rich compared to Warren Buffett or Bill Gates or some of our more wealthy neighbors here in northern Virginia, but in the eyes of the world as a whole, we're all rich.

Being rich does not automatically disqualify a person from heaven. It is possible to be wealthy and a true follower of Christ. At the same time, being wealthy is *not* an unmistakable sign that God is pleased with you. The disciples of Jesus, like most people in the time of Jesus, believed it *was* a sign of God's favor. They saw material riches as a sign of God's pleasure. They were astonished by what Jesus said here. If rich people couldn't be saved, they wondered, who could? If it is so difficult for the rich, with all their advantages, to obtain eternal life, what hope could there possibly be for any of us?

What did Jesus say? Wealthy or not, He said, the salvation of anyone is humanly impossible. But what can never be accomplished by men or by any human means, is Himpossible with God. God is the Doer of the impossible. Salvation is possible only by God's power.

In His answer to the disciples, Jesus makes it clear that salvation is totally the work of God. It is God's work from beginning to end. Apart from the grace of God, it is impossible for anyone to obtain eternal life and enter God's kingdom. We cannot do it for ourselves. But God does it for us. It is all by grace and only by grace.

Unless and until you and I come to terms with this, and give up the last vestige of any confidence in ourselves, our family heritage, our wealth, our generosity, our good deeds, our service to the church, our reputation for righteous living, or anything else, and receive the gift of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we will end up as sad and disheartened as the rich young man.

It is worth noting that we don't know if this was the end of the story of this rich young man. We don't know if he ever changed his mind. We don't know if he ever had a change of heart, severed the cord that bound him to his possessions, and came back and followed Jesus. The Bible doesn't tell us. It is possible that he did, and that one day you and I will get to meet him in heaven.

Maybe there is someone here today – or more than one “someone” – who can identify with the rich young man because at some point in your life you said no to Jesus. Outwardly you may appear to be a follower of Christ. You act like you're a Christian. But you know in your heart that you are not living for Him. You are living for someone or something else. You may regret that decision you made in the past. And you may think it is too late for you. It is

not! It is not too late to come back to Jesus. It is not too late to surrender whatever it is in your life that you have not yet surrendered to Him. It may seem impossible to you. But it is not impossible with God.

What *is* impossible is thinking that we can ever commend ourselves to God and obtain eternal life on the strength of our own efforts or virtue or wealth.

ACT THREE: THE DISCIPLES' INHERITANCE

Finally, in Act Three, Peter enters the picture. In contrast to the rich young man who couldn't bring himself to part with his possessions, Peter says to Jesus: "We (the disciples) have left everything to follow you!" (10:28). Mark and Luke don't have it, but Matthew's account includes this question to Jesus from the lips of Peter: "What then will there be for us?" (Matthew 19:27).

Peter wanted to know: Will there be a reward for us who have given up our old life to come and follow Jesus? What kind of reward will there be?

It is the kind of question only someone like Peter would ask. But we're all interested in the answer.

There is not time today to examine the answer Jesus gives, except to say that He promises three things in verses 29 and 30:

1. Multiplied blessings in the fellowship of the church – "a hundred times as much" as you have given up for His sake.
2. Persecution (the kind of reward we would rather not receive).
3. The blessing of eternal life in His kingdom.

Come back next Sunday, and we will look more closely at the inheritance Jesus promises to all who surrender their all to Him.

Despite all his missteps in life, Peter would discover that letting go of everything else in order to follow Jesus really is worth it. If you embrace Jesus with your whole heart, even if life is sometimes hard (and it is), you will not regret it.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.