

## An Unexpected Answer (Mark 10:17-22)

The passage Kim just read for us comes under the heading of “The Rich, Young Ruler” in most of our versions of the New Testament. It is featured in the three synoptic gospels, and the heading is derived as a compilation of descriptions of this person from the three accounts. For the most part, the point of the account is to show how this person’s wealth got in the way of his ability to make a commitment to Jesus. This is a correct understanding of the passage itself—Jesus himself went on to make the point, in the rest of the passage that we did not read, how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God when wealth has become the defining factor in their life. In that state, wealth has taken over the place of God in life.

As an aside, when many of us read this passage, we tend to gloss over the teaching since we don’t consider ourselves rich by the standard indicated in the passage. On the other hand, the man in our text never owned a microwave, a laptop, an 80 inch television, or a smartphone. If he was rich, what are we? That’s a lesson for another day—though hopefully that idea will simmer in the background of your thought.

Obviously, the elements of this account will inform our approach to it, but in a more tangential fashion as I want to focus on what happens when we don’t get the answer we anticipate, or necessarily want from Jesus. What then?

This has happened in my life; I suspect the same is true of you, and I imagine that the circumstances under which we’ve collectively lived this past year has prompted conversation with Jesus over a variety of topics. Some of our praying might fall into the pattern Anne Lamott suggests: Help, Wow, Thanks. Hopefully you’ve been able to move through each aspect of this, but what if you’re still between “help” and “wow”? Or maybe you’re in the place of “help” and “is there another option available?” In that spot we’re tempted to enter into negotiation—what about this instead? or, what if I do this—will that change the answer?

Just to be clear, let’s agree that the question we’re asking is a genuine, legitimate concern—not something outlandish or nonsensical. We come with an honest inquiry—like the man in our passage who came with the most important question: what must I do to inherit eternal life? meaning in this context: to enter the kingdom of God? which is the very heart of Jesus’ teaching and ministry. Perhaps our questions circle around this as well—where is the abundant life amid this crisis? Where do I find meaning in the deprivations I’m experiencing? What must I do to regain your favor? How do I recapture your peace to replace the anxiety swirling around in my thoughts? What do I do now that this opportunity is forsaken, that promotion vanished, these plans upended, this income stream dwindled or dried up, this relationship unraveled? And perhaps the very thing, which for you is the way you best serve God, or convey your love for God, or, if we’re being completely honest, the way you justify your standing with God has been taken from you, or you’re incapable of pursuing it because of what’s transpired around us—what do you do now?

This, I would suggest, is where the man in our passage was when he came to Jesus. Something prompted the question in him—it’s the right question, and it’s directed to the right person. We don’t know what brought him to the place to ask this question, but there clearly seems to be a sense of unfinished business behind his question—have I done enough? have I covered all the bases? have I checked all the boxes? Somewhere within himself, doubt lingers about his standing.

Based on his reaction to Jesus’ ultimate answer, I have a hunch that the man might have had some pre-conceived ideas about the answer he was seeking. Given his own sense of righteousness—all these commandments I have kept from my youth, his status—he was a ruler, perhaps of a synagogue, someone of influence, and his wealth—perhaps he was approaching his question from the perspective of a potential patron; he might have anticipated a range of answers anywhere from: “you’ve got nothing to worry about” to “why don’t you consider underwriting some of my efforts,” or “maybe you could throw some of your influence my way.” What he didn’t expect was, “sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor thereby storing up treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.” He might well have been the type of person who was accustomed to leveraging his position to gain what he desired. What

he discovered was that Jesus wasn't interested in his own sense of righteousness, or status, or wealth. Jesus was interested in his person—just himself. The text tells us that Jesus looked at him, and loved him. That is, he saw into the depth of the person himself seeing him for who he was—not what he had or could offer—Jesus saw what the man himself could not or would not see in himself. That who he was to himself was covered over by the complexities of his own self-image, status, and wealth. He was coming to Jesus on his own terms—here's what I have to offer, but none of that mattered to Jesus. He himself was all that mattered to Jesus who loved him—Jesus wanted what was best for him and on the basis of his love reaching out to him, Jesus was compelled to tell him the truth.

In the man's self-understanding, his wealth, and what that had afforded him was the measure of his worth. What Jesus told him, in effect, was that his true worth was far more valuable than his wealth. Jesus saw before him a man whose soul was fragmented by the weight of his identity freighted by wealth that framed his approach to life, to others, and ultimately to God. In this man's situation, the answer wasn't bound up in one more hoop to jump through or one more acquisition to juggle in his portfolio. The route to wholeness of soul for him was to relinquish what was actually shredding his soul so that he could see what would make it whole again. This isn't a blanket condemnation of wealth, nor does it mean that every person of means must follow suit. There's no inherent virtue in poverty, but for this man it held the promise of what he sought. Sadly, it wasn't the answer he could accept—at least at that moment. One hopes that a change of mind might have followed later upon reflection or a change of circumstances that brought conviction. Note that Jesus didn't negotiate. Reluctantly Jesus watched him leave.

So what do we make of this for ourselves? Helpfully this reminds us that our standing with God through Christ doesn't depend upon what we do for Christ, but solely upon what Christ does for us. We can be robbed of the joy of our salvation when we get tangled up in a performance based faith. This doesn't mean that there aren't ways to be engaged in our faith. Coming to faith in Christ doesn't invite us to lounge in an existential easy chair waiting for heaven. But it does mean that our place in the kingdom of heaven is not secured by the work we do on Christ's behalf. When Christ said, "take my yoke upon you" that indicates activity, even labor—a yoke was an instrument of labor. Christ means join in my yoke—work with me in the energy I provide and the direction I set. And we're not told where that work will take place or what it will require—just that Christ will be there and his power—grace—will see us through. This is the "follow me" piece of our commitment which we can forsake when we stipulate, on the basis of our own understanding or identity what we're willing to do. Performance based faith says, "Look at me, Jesus—see what I'm doing for you." Grace based faith hears Jesus say, "Look to me—see what I am doing for you. Come, let's work together, in this place, doing that." Which of these defines your perspective?

Another lesson meets us as we circle back to something we touched on earlier. Jesus' call for the man to relinquish all that he possessed represented spiritual surgery to free the man of what was blocking his vision to see what Jesus offered in the kingdom. It was radical for the man was captive to his vision of the way life was. Until that was removed, he had no hope of finding what he sought. In many ways, we've all been experiencing a bit of that kind of surgery through the crisis visited upon us. In varying degrees the things of life that we've counted as the stuff of life have been stripped away from us. And some of this has been extremely challenging and painful causing anguish that can lead to despair. Last week Grace St. John gently led our thought in managing some of the dynamics we've experienced thereby. But there is a terrible mercy in this as well—not that God intentionally sent this in judgement, but in the spirit of Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." God works in all things—pandemics and crises of all stripes—for the good, a benefit, in those who love him. We will find mercy as we seek the grace to pray about our way forward in the face of loss for the sake of seeing Jesus alone. We risk squandering the moment by clinging to our desire, our idea, our sense of how things should be, our hopes of return to what we once had. We're clearly in a place of disorientation. But the question before us in this moment comes from Tish Harrison

Warren who asks, "Is Jesus enough?" Can we shift our perspective away from what lies in ruin around us to see Jesus still here with us in our ruin beckoning us to himself? Do we love him for what we have from him, or for who he is? Perhaps in this terrible mercy, we're able to see Jesus as never before whose love for us doesn't depend on what we have or what we can do, but simply for who we are, and through our tears we'll find the grace to say—lead me, Lord. I will follow. AMEN