

Learning to Follow Well (Mark 10:17-31)

This is a rather startling piece of teaching from Jesus about the nature of God's kingdom—and it has been subject to a wide variety of interpretation. Some of this, especially early on, took his teaching at face value resulting in ecclesiastical condemnation of private wealth; many of the monastic movements that developed in church history pointed to this account in support of their insistence on the vow of voluntary poverty for those seeking to become monks. Early Christian communities practiced the idea of possessions in common—you can find evidence for this in the pages of Acts that describes people donating wealth to the apostles for distribution among those of need within the emerging communities of Christ followers. There are contemporary expressions of this, especially among communities loosely identified with the emerging church movement where a group of believers covenant to live together in an apartment complex or large homes sharing common facilities, income, and possessions.

There are interpretations of this passage that soften the teaching either by pointing to the fact that Jesus didn't apply this to everyone, but only to certain individuals of means ostensibly because their wealth was keeping them from practicing full trust in God for provision. A variation of this holds that as long as one isn't possessed by possessions, the instruction to dispose of wealth in favor of the poor doesn't apply. But how finely that line is drawn is an open question—how does one determine the degree to which they are possessed by possessions? And, who makes that determination? Certainly, as those who follow Jesus we are obliged to seriously consider the impact of anything in our lives that would get in the way of our trust and confidence in him, and where we determine such obstacles exist, we do well to recognize this and deal with it accordingly.

But in this, let's not lose sight of the fact that Jesus was proposing a radical shift in conventional wisdom about the nature of God's kingdom that upended the thought of his day and still applies to ours. This idea of wealth as evidence of God's blessing and favor still resonates in our church culture. There are entire movements of church thought that teach this, that God's design for you as a follower of Jesus is to be radically blessed with wealth, and that you should not make apologies for living well as this undercuts God's blessing. I'm not sure how these communities teach this particular passage. But that's really not our concern, except to recognize where and how this obscures the message of Jesus. He himself, during his earthly ministry, was not a person of means. For most of his adult life he was a common laborer who had to work for his supper. During his public ministry he relied on the generosity of a group of women identified in Luke 8 as those helping to support Jesus and his disciples out of their own means. None of his original followers were wealthy—at least compared to the man in this account. They had means—many were commercial fishers, but they left that behind to follow Jesus.

Given this, it's interesting that a person of means in that day would seek counsel from a person like Jesus, who would have been considered on the lower end of the social scale. Typically it would have been the other way around. Patronage was common in that day, where people in need sought a patron who could intervene for them, or provide for them in exchange for loyalty, labor, or protection. Luke provides an example of this in chapter 7 of his gospel when a centurion's highly valued servant lay dying. The centurion heard of Jesus, and in Luke's account he sent some elders of the Jews to Jesus to ask him for his servant's healing. The elders pleaded with Jesus to respond saying, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." The centurion was evidently a community patron, and those within his circle of care interceded with Jesus for him. The patron was calling in his chips. As the story unfolds, the patron actually exceeds the virtue and faith of all recognizing beyond them the authority and standing of Jesus—that's a message for another time. But it highlights the concept of patronage where people of means were esteemed and sought out for their favor. Yet in this instance, a person who may have been a patron sought counsel and favor from someone well below his status.

So, what drew him to Jesus? What did he see in Jesus that compelled him to seek him out? We can only speculate about this as the account doesn't explain it. Perhaps he saw

something in Jesus that eluded him, that despite his own wealth and standing he sensed an internal disquiet that troubled his sense of self especially in terms of his standing with God. He was clearly seeking assurance—but he didn't get the answer he was hoping for. Possibly he was trying to fit what Jesus said into the conventional framework of his day. On that basis, Jesus' direction to dispose of his wealth in favor of the poor would put him in their company, an unwelcome prospect. Perhaps closer to the truth, in keeping with what the passage indicates, he just couldn't see himself disposing of his wealth. He was looking for a quick fix to his spiritual anxiety rather than a transformed life.

Think for a moment of what he squandered—the personal invitation to join in the community gathered around Jesus; the chance to learn from him directly; the opportunity to receive a renewed vision for life, and, of course, the path that would free him from the anxiety that prompted his inquiry in the first place. He wound up exchanging eternal riches for temporary gain—at least then. Perhaps he made a different decision later on—heaven knows.

I wonder, could it be that his problem remains ours? Are we seeking a quick fix for something deeper that requires more? Do we need to update our grasp of God's kingdom to once again realize that it's not what we do for God that gains God's favor and secures our standing with God? It is always and only what God has done for us in Jesus Christ that counts—it is our yes to Christ that draws us into the flow of God's grace where our lives are transformed and our vision for life begins to align with that of Christ. And when we grasp this, we realize that Christ is not interested so much in what we have, but in who we are. The only thing we take with us into the life to come is the changed person we are who displays the character of Christ and by that the glory of God. This is the only gift we can offer to God, but God deems it priceless for our life is the one thing we actually possess and control. To willingly offer ourselves up to God is an invaluable gift, for it is the one thing God cannot demand. As this text portrays, Christ offered the rich young man the opportunity to live in the fullness of life available from him. But the decision belonged to the man himself. Sadly, he declined, and Jesus honored the choice.

Now, having said that Jesus isn't so much interested in what we have, it may be that what we have is preventing us from fully living into Christ's life, and where that's the case we are obliged to listen to Jesus' direction and follow it. This is where discernment becomes an important feature in our life—to discern, or recognize the voice of Jesus, and this will involve time in cultivating our relationship with Jesus to the place where we are confident that it is his voice we're hearing. We have before discussed the idea of having a conversational relationship with Jesus which depends on conversation partners talking and listening to one another. If we're experiencing difficulty in this, it could be that we're doing more talking than listening. Listening to Christ is a matter of paying attention to thoughts that enter our mind—it doesn't have to be audible. Speech is little more than an agreed upon pattern of sounds that generate thought. True communication occurs when something is heard to which thought is given that informs understanding to the point where decisions can be made. Christ, by the Spirit, "speaks" by generating thought. That can happen through speech, perhaps even now. It can happen by reading, but it primarily comes through thought that emerges in your mind after time spent in conversation with God. And it may help to run what you believe you've heard by someone seasoned in faith, who knows Christ intimately as a means of confirmation or for gaining perspective. This is called spiritual direction. Learning to recognize Christ's voice is a critical component of our journey in faith, and when Jesus speaks, listen well.

Having made the commitment to hear him, how do we come to the place where we are ready to make the decision to follow through on what we hear, especially when it comes to something like this man in our text faced where Jesus might tell us to redirect our wealth, or dispose of it in favor of the poor, or to let go of something we cherish or believe essential to our well-being? What if Jesus says, "Go, and close down your FaceBook account, and give the time you normally devote to it in serving the disadvantaged, or tutoring a child, or caring for an elderly neighbor." Would our faces fall, would we retreat in sadness because we have many FB friends? It's a silly illustration, but what if it were more serious? Would we be ready to absolve ourselves of what Jesus considers a hinderance to our discipleship?

This is where we might consider the merits of cultivating what Ignatian spirituality calls, the discipline of indifference. This not indifference in the sense of “I don’t care,” which is our common understanding of the word. It is rather living with a sense of detachment to what is ours. In the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises it is defined as, “being detached enough from things, people, or experiences to be able either to take them up or to leave them aside, depending on whether they help us to praise, reverence, and serve God.” Cultivating the discipline of indifference means recognizing that we are not defined by things, people, or experiences—we are defined as ones loved by God, cherished and valued in Christ. And while we’re on this, understand as well that this primary definition isn’t conditional—this is still true even if we choose not to be detached. It may change our apprehension of God; it doesn’t change God’s disposition towards us. But since we are followers of Jesus desiring to live in the fullness of his life, cultivating the spiritual discipline of indifference allows us to view all things in light of their value for praise, reverence, and service to God. We are essentially (and actually) stewards, or managers of what we have or hold, and we are willing to allow Jesus to inform our attachments. I remember a professor, an elderly priest, who once described what led him to academia. When he joined the order to which he belonged, his chief ambition was to play the organ and compose music for the order’s worship times. But his Abbot said that what they needed most was an ethicist, one trained in systematic Christian ethics, so he spent the next six years in Rome deeply engaged in scholarly work. He became a brilliant ethicist whose teaching and writing profoundly impacted his order and students. His life modeled the discipline of indifference—he let go of his ambition to play and compose sacred music in favor of academia that provided great benefit in service to God.

Friends, following Christ takes place in a fluid environment where needs and priorities ebb and flow. We don’t come to this adventure with a fixed agenda on our terms outlining a static commitment. Ours is a living God who moves in the moments of history and who knows exactly how we are enabled and equipped to participate in God’s movement. The question facing each of us is this: are we willing and able to move with God? AMEN