

MARK 10:17-31
ST JAMES', 14.10.18, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

The story of the Rich Young Man appears in three of the four gospels. It clearly made a deep impression on Jesus' followers! It's by piecing together the three accounts that we get the full description of the rich young ruler. He might even have been a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest court of the Jewish nation.

This young man has clearly realised that there's more to receiving eternal life than following rules, and he's eager to find out what he's missing. He runs up to Jesus - not many people would do that under the hot sun - and he kneels at Jesus' feet.

But his question shows that he really doesn't understand God's dealings with his people. *What must I do to inherit eternal life?* His understanding is all too human: he assumes that there's something he can do which will earn him eternal life; maybe he thinks of salvation as rather like sitting an exam, and coming up with high enough marks to pass. The trouble is, of course, that the pass mark is 100%; and it's unattainable.

It's interesting that Jesus does tell the young man what he must do to receive eternal life – he must sell all he has, give the money to the poor, and come and follow Jesus. I trust we all realise, though, that Jesus isn't telling the young man how to 'buy' eternal life; eternal life is not a commodity to be purchased. Rather, Jesus is showing this rich

young ruler that in order to receive eternal life, he must put Jesus and the gospel right at the very top of his priority list.

Discipleship means commitment, Jesus was telling the man; he goes on to tell the disciples that discipleship is impossible (if it depends on human commitment – it only becomes possible with God's commitment); and that although discipleship means giving up everything, it provides rewards which far outweigh any sacrifice.

DISCIPLESHIP MEANS COMMITMENT

When Jesus tells the rich young ruler what he needs to do to receive eternal life, the young man goes *away sad, because he had great wealth*. His response shows that Jesus has put his finger on the spot; for all his eagerness, for all his grasp of spiritual truth, his wealth is more important to him than receiving eternal life. He isn't prepared to *deny himself and take up his cross and follow Jesus* (Mark 8:34). Or as Luke puts it, to *give up everything he has* (Luke 14:33).

Although Jesus loves this young man, he lets him walk away. He doesn't hector him, or pester him; neither will he lower the level of commitment he requires of every single disciple. We're all called to give up everything we have. If we won't do it, we're not fit to be Jesus' disciples; it doesn't stop him loving us, but it does stop us loving him as he demands.

Jesus requires absolute, total and utter commitment from his followers. All our possessions must be at his disposal. It's shameful that we who are so rich often find it so hard to be generous with all the Lord has

given us. We tend to reduce the issue of our money simply to mean what we give, whether to church or to charities. Giving away a proportion of our income is a start – but surely our Lord has the right to decide how we use what we keep as well? Yes, we should be wise in our use of our possessions, but never greedy or selfish. And we must take care never to make the mistake of depending on our possessions. Our security doesn't lie in our income, or our home, or our savings, or our inheritance; our security lies solely in our Lord's goodness to us.

Jesus requires absolute, total and utter commitment from his followers. All our relationships must be at his disposal. The Bible has a great deal to say about our relationships, and especially about our sexual relationships. Sadly, many Christians choose deliberately to ignore, or wilfully to misinterpret, what Scripture says about sex and marriage. Our society tells us that without sex, we'll remain unfilled; that we have a right to so-called fulfilment and happiness. Scripture tells us that it's not good for us to be alone, and in our society it's difficult not to be alone if we're not in a sexual relationship. But as Jesus' followers, we're called to point to and model a better way of life, we're called to love one another and care for one another, and ensure that our Christian brothers and sisters aren't left alone. We're also called to follow the teaching of Scripture, rather than the pressures of our society, in every area of our lives, including our relationships, whether sexual or otherwise.

Jesus requires absolute, total and utter commitment from his followers. All our relationships must be at his disposal. If sex is one area which

we're tempted to put above Jesus on our priority list, another area is power. Money, sex and power are the three things most likely to come between us and the Lord. By nature, we want to keep control of our lives; by nature, we want to be higher up the pecking order than our colleagues; by nature, we want to control our own lives, and if possible, the lives of those around us. But if we want to follow Jesus, if we want to receive eternal life, we must lay all this at his feet, and allow him total control over it all.

Discipleship means complete and utter commitment to Christ; discipleship means complete and utter submission to Christ. If he asks us to sell all we have and give the money to the poor, that's what we must do. If he asks us to end a relationship, or not to begin one in the first place, that's what we must do. If he takes away everything we have, and leaves us helpless and powerless, then with Job, we must say, *The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised* (Job 1:21). The most important thing in our lives is Jesus Christ, and our relationship with him. No matter how good anything else is, if it gets in the way of our relationship with Jesus, if it means that we trust something, or someone, other than Christ for salvation, we must be ruthless, and reject it, get rid of it, stop it.

DISCIPLESHIP IS (IM)POSSIBLE

How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God! We need to recognise that we're among *the rich*. A literal translation would be, 'How hard it is for those who have things' We all have an abundance of things. Our wardrobes are stuffed full of clothes; our

homes are stuffed full of gadgets; our larders are stuffed full of a huge variety of food. In global terms, you and I are on the rich list – yes, even those of us who are poor in comparison to people around us.

So when Jesus says, *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God*, it's scary stuff! It means that it's totally impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God!

The disciples are thunderstruck! *Who, then, can be saved?* they ask in exasperation and indignation. If it's impossible for the rich to be saved, what hope is there for anyone else? In their understanding, wealth was a sign of God's blessing on a person. The rich came by everything more easily than the poor. If it's impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, *Who, then, can be saved?*

In fact, says Jesus, it's hard for anyone to enter the kingdom of God (v 24). On a human level, no-one can be saved. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, you or I can do to earn eternal life. Even selling everything we have and giving the money to the poor isn't enough. We simply can't do enough good things to get eternal life. The pass mark for the exam is impossible to achieve. *With man this is impossible* (v 27).

But, *all things are possible with God* (v 27). Dealing with the impossible is God's speciality. Those who put their total trust in him, who become like children (10:15, just before today's passage), receive eternal life. Those who've put their total trust in Jesus don't need the security of

riches, or things, or relationships or power, because they know that the Lord will provide them with everything they need. Not long after this encounter with the rich young ruler, Jesus met Zacchaeus. What a contrast! Zacchaeus didn't need Jesus to tell him to sell everything he had and give the money to the poor; he opened his heart to Jesus, and it changed his whole outlook on life. And so, spontaneously, Zacchaeus declared, *I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount* (Luke 19:8)

DISCIPLESHIP BRINGS REWARDS

Towards the end of our passage, Peter speaks up: *We've left everything to follow you!* (v 28). Jesus' reply shows that once we've given up everything for him, he by no means leaves us empty-handed: *I tell you the truth, no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel, will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age . . . and in the age to come, eternal life* (vv 29-30). The Lord knows what we need, and he showers blessings on us. As Christians, wherever we go, we know we have family, people who will accept us, love us, and care for us. As Christians, whatever we need, the Lord will provide. And as Christians, we have absolute confidence that the Lord is waiting to receive us into heaven in the age to come.

It won't all be plain sailing – amongst that list of blessings, Jesus mentions *and with them, persecutions* (v 30). 'The wicked spiritual forces in the heavenly world, the rulers, authorities and cosmic powers

of this dark age' (Ephesians 6:12), amongst which, of course, is Mammon, will be arrayed against us. There'll be plenty of people who are determined to destroy us; another 'rich, young ruler' went by the name of Saul of Tarsus, and he subjected the members of the infant church to fierce persecution before he submitted to Jesus as Lord. But overall, the faithful disciple of Christ will be far more than adequately compensated for all he or she sacrifices.

CONCLUSION

The average British person probably tends to think very like the rich young ruler in the story. People might vocalise it along the lines of: 'I do my best, I pay my taxes, I love my family, I obey the law – what more can you want?'

As the rich young ruler discovered, the Lord demands a great deal more. He demands nothing less than total commitment.

So this morning, ask yourself what gets in the way of your relationship with the Lord. In what areas of your life don't you trust him? In what areas of your life are you not prepared to let him have control? The Lord won't lower the level of commitment he demands, even for you!

The Lord demands total commitment, but he doesn't command total perfection! Eternal life, salvation, the Kingdom of God, is available to everyone who chooses to put their total trust in him. Nothing can get in the way of that, unless you allow it to get in the way. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, married or single, young or old, healthy or unhealthy

– whatever and whoever you are, the Kingdom of God is open to you if you're prepared to give up everything you have.

And the rewards far outweigh the costs!