

“Sorrowful, For He Was Very Rich”

Mark 10:17-22

We refer to this incident as the story of the Rich Young Ruler. He is usually depicted as a tragic bad example. Today I come to his defense. We like to think we are smarter and more committed than he was. When Jesus told him plainly the one thing he should do, we find it astonishing that he did not go and do it immediately. We make the assumption that we would have responded positively. We would have obeyed. We are not as greedy as the young ruler. I am not at all sure such an assumption is correct.

It is easy to make rules someone else should follow. It happens in Congress, and we don't think it's fair. Yet most of us lean in that direction. We have a natural tendency to judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. Jesus made an extraordinary suggestion to the young ruler: “give away all your possessions and come, follow me!” Could you have obeyed? Probably not, even though you know something the young ruler did not know. He did not know this Galilean would later be called the savior of the world. He did not know world history would be divided into BC and AD because of Jesus.

Take a look at this man's character. Forget for a moment that he went away sorrowful. Notice other facts in the story. He was addressed as a ruler, probably head of the local synagogue. Jesus may have been popular with common folk, but influential leaders tended to be less than friendly toward him. Remember Nicodemus, another ruler who secretly admired Jesus. Nicodemus discreetly waited for darkness to cover his tracks when he chose to speak with Jesus. The man we are considering today had courage. Disregarding peer pressure, he addressed Jesus directly, in full daylight. I admire him for his bravery.

I believe our national leaders mostly lack such courage. Instead of heroic actions propelled by strong conviction, I see politicians testing the wind, not so much to improve our nation but to stay in office. The rich young ruler was exceptional, in his day and in ours.

He had enthusiasm. “He came running”. It seems undignified. This young ruler knew what people would be saying. He did not care. He saw opportunity for a face-to-face talk with Jesus. He threw dignity to the wind and came running. I call it enthusiasm. Did you know that “enthusiasm” literally means “in godliness”?

The man was humble. He fell at Jesus' feet, right there in the dusty road. It would become the joke tomorrow in every wayside tavern. The secret police would bring charges of treason: here is one of their chosen leaders kneeling in submission to the carpenter's son. The internal revenue service would find ways to take away his

wealth. The young ruler's own conviction guided him. He set aside all arrogance, all pride, seeking only an answer from Jesus.

You Christians who would scorn this young man, think about it. There is no deadlier sin than pride, and righteous pride is the worst. I cringe whenever I hear any preacher declare with authority who is saved and who is not saved; who is righteous and who is not. Set this down on the credit side for the rich young ruler. He had the grace of humility

The wealthy young man was sincere. Unlike the Pharisees, he had no trick questions or theological riddles. He asked a short, simple question: "Good master, please tell me what I must do to have eternal life". Apparently the man enjoyed what we consider the good life. He had comfort, he had wealth, he had social status. However, he recognized these things were temporary. Unlike our current society, he was concerned about eternity.

In the graveyard of Timber Ridge Church the 250 year old marker for John Mackey is inscribed: "Remember friend, when you pass by....as you are now so once was I. As I am now you soon shall be. Therefore think on eternity." The rich young ruler thought about eternity. He wanted an answer, so he asked Jesus. I see him as an excellent role model.

Pay attention to Jesus' response. Too many preachers think Jesus insisted the man must give up his wealth if he were to go to heaven. Not so. The man's question was blunt; so was the answer. Jesus said three words: "obey the commandments". How many times have you heard pious Christians speak about "the plan of salvation"?... as if there is some complicated formula for getting into heaven! Why do we overlook the authoritative word of Jesus our Lord? Is it too simple? He was referring, of course, to the Ten Commandments. Obey them and you will have eternal life. Why in the name of common sense is our current culture, one spot at a time, outlawing the display of those ancient rules for living this life and the next? I think the situation can be covered by one word: Insanity.

The young ruler said, "from my youth I have obeyed the commandments". Jesus looked at him for a long moment with deep love and affection. Then he added: "one more thing you might try. Give your possessions to the poor, and come, follow me, and you will have riches in heaven." The young man went away sorrowful, for he was very rich. Does that sound like a contradiction? We think wealth contributes to happiness. As Sophie Taylor famously quipped, "I have been poor, and I have been rich, and rich is better!" But in this case, the young man's wealth caused him to be sorrowful. He was unwilling to swap wealth on earth for wealth in heaven. Maybe.

The Bible does not give us a sequel. Years later perhaps, after Jesus had returned to heaven, the young man may have reconsidered. Listen to this excerpt from the biblical record: "Those who possessed lands and houses and goods sold them and

laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet, to be distributed to each according to his need". It is precisely what Jesus suggested the rich young ruler should do. The Bible record continues, "and Joses, surnamed Barnabas, having much land, sold it and brought the money to the apostles". I like to think the rich young ruler's name was Barnabas, and that he finally met the challenge of Jesus with magnificent abandon, and so found abundant life on earth and later, riches in heaven. We do not know. But we do know this: a person may go away from Jesus sorrowful, then later return.

The prodigal son came home to the waiting father, Jesus said. We can willfully reject God's clear challenge today, and we certainly do. But later, with more maturity and good sense we can return and do the right thing. Visit any church and look around you. Note how many earnest seekers have gray hair. They have matured. They are wiser with age. It's not too late.

It's never too late to turn around and get on the right path. Thanks be to God.

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