

## TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Psalm 90:12-17

Hebrews 4:12-16

Mark 10:17-31

It's that time of year. The leaves are starting to show their true colors. Pumpkins are appearing in the farmers' markets and along stone walls. There is a nip in the air. The days are growing shorter. Fall is here and I have been dreading this man's arrival for weeks. He seems to turn up this time of year with his question about eternal life, initiating Jesus' unsettling response. He may be familiar to those of you who have hung around a church for awhile, because he tends to show up just about the time the church kicks off its stewardship season, the time when we talk about money.

Now if you haven't been around a church, if this whole church thing is new to you, let's pause for a minute and explain stewardship season. This is when those responsible for planning and leadership of the congregation are starting to put together a budget for the coming year and preparing to ask the rest of us to start thinking about our giving. Soon we will hear sermons and announcements challenging us to ponder how our knowledge and experience of the grace of God in Jesus Christ transforms and blesses our lives. And then to consider how we will respond to that grace through the giving of our money, the spending of our time and the use of our abilities. In other words, we are asked to give to God in response to all that God has given us, particularly in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. So this man with all his possessions shows up about now to nudge us along toward thinking about that response.

Still, I dread his coming because he is too familiar, he is too much like me and maybe, too much like you. In fact, I think he would probably feel right at home in Fairfield County. Here is what we know about this man. He was a good and decent man. He was a church-goer who knew the Bible. He was a hard worker. He had done well and was interested in doing better. And he had many possessions. Doesn't that sound a little like us?

But for all that he was and all that he had, there was something missing, there was something more that he wanted. So he sought out Jesus and dropped on his knees before him to make his request. And again, isn't this a little like us? We, too, want to be close to Jesus, so we keep coming back to church, keep listening to the sermons, keep offering our prayers. We want to hear his words, to be assured of his presence and his leading. Maybe we long for something that we can't quite put a name on. This man called it eternal life, but maybe you would call it faith or how to live out faith. Maybe you would call it life's ultimate meaning. Maybe you showed up this morning hoping to meet Jesus in a new and deeper way, like this man, and if that is so, then his interaction with Jesus may make us uncomfortable because it says that following Jesus is costly. However, I have found that if a Bible story makes me uncomfortable, then it means I need to pay attention.

So here goes. I think we should pay attention to what the man himself says. First, there is the man's question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" The man seems to think that eternal life is a reward for good behavior, something that can be earned. His question reveals transactional thinking—if I do this then God will give me that, a kind of spiritual IRA in which he could make a deposit now and thus guarantee a safe and comfortable future. It gives me pause that he uses the word "inherit." As we know, an inheritance is a gift, a bequest given strictly at the discretion of the donor. The recipient has no say in how an estate is to be distributed, yet this man thinks that by doing something he can sway God, he can obtain eternal life, something that is God's alone to give. The man seems to trust his own abilities more than God's goodness.

Second is the man's response to Jesus' answer, listing some of the commandments, "I have kept all these since my youth." After Jesus has told the man that no one is good but God, the man declares that he is good, that he is blameless, that he has kept the Law fully. Again, an affirmation that reflects his confidence in his own ability to accomplish his own salvation.

These culminate then in Jesus' words of instruction, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." Elsewhere in the gospels, when Jesus performed a healing, he frequently began with the word, *go*, and so it is here, too. Jesus recognized that this man was possessed, not by demons, but by his possessions. He knew that the man had been seduced by his wealth into believing that he could control his future, buy his salvation and rely on himself alone. Apparently, he was possessed by the belief that there could be no free gifts even from God, that his money was his own to do with as he chose, and to give up his money and possessions would leave him bereft. To be healed would be costly, even painful. And so, in the only case that I know of in scripture, a person in need of healing, chose to decline Jesus' prescription for wholeness. The man walked away.

It is a sad story, a hard story, because it was his sense of self-sufficiency and self-produced security that cut him off from the gift of grace. His life had become an achievement earned, a commodity purchased rather than a gift gratefully received and shared. God had become unnecessary or simply another commodity used for personal ends. And so I dread this man coming around for his story sounds like bad news for you and me who have abundant resources. Still, there is more to the story. There is good news here as well as warning.

Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the man, with all his flaws—his sense of self-satisfaction and self-confidence, his lack of self-reflection and his inability to receive life as a gift, available without price—Jesus looked at this imperfect man and loved him. The good news, of course, is that if Jesus could love this man, then surely he must love us, too—we with our stuffed closets and filled attics, we who can be so easily seduced by money and possessions, we who can find it hard to escape the pride we have in our very real accomplishments—if Jesus could love him, then surely he must look on us with love, too.

More good news—Jesus not only told the man to get rid of all that possessed him, he then summoned the man to become a disciple, to come, follow Jesus. Remarkable, don't you think, that he would call such as this man to join the twelve, but he did. So, too, Jesus calls us to come and follow.

Will Willimon tells a story about leading a college dormitory Bible study when he was chaplain at Duke University. He presented this story of the rich man and Jesus to the students and then asked, "What do you make of this story?"

"Had Jesus ever met this man before?" asked one of the students.

"Why do you ask?" Willimon responded.

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response. In my experience, a professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he really could be a disciple."

And then another student said thoughtfully, "I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff, I don't think I could ever break free. But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."<sup>i</sup>

Isn't that astounding? What we may have heard as bad news, hard, demanding, sacrificial news, those students heard as gracious good news. Jesus invites people, all kinds of people, to divest of whatever it is that keeps them from trusting themselves to God's love. To break free of whatever possesses them. To let go of the stuff that weighs them down and keeps them from following. To become unencumbered and available to the winds of the Spirit. And Jesus' invitation comes with this affirmation, "I believe you can do it."

It's that time of year. This dear man whom Jesus loved, has come around again to make us uncomfortable enough to examine our relationship with our money and possessions, to ponder what causes us to turn away from Jesus' invitation. His tale reminds us of not only the challenge, but also the promise of following Jesus. Therein lies the good news.

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<sup>i</sup> William H. Willimon, "The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus," [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org), October 11, 2009.