

Our text tells us that Jesus is beginning to set out on a journey, when a man of means approaches him, kneels at his feet, and asks the question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Pardon the pun, but there’s a lot to unpack here. My assumption is that Jesus, a man of means by no means, travels light. I’d even wager that the wealthy man who comes to seek his counsel has more possessions on his person than Jesus has possessed in a lifetime. And maybe it’s just been a weird week, but when I read this text, I imagine Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk approaching Roger Miller’s self-proclaimed King of the Road. I think this is the kind of wealth disparity Mark’s author wants us to imagine. I also think this is the kind of spiritual wealth disparity Mark’s author wants us to imagine.

If we read this passage too quickly, we will often perceive an eagerness for discipleship on the part of the wealthy man, and a kind of harsh literalism from Jesus that says wealthy people are less deserving of God’s kin-dom. Here’s a man who appears sincere, who has kept the commandments, and seems like a pretty nice guy all things considered. And because we pay so much attention to the wealthy man’s courtesy and eagerness, we often forget to listen to how he frames his question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

If this fellow is wealthy, and lives in the time of Jesus, that means he owns lots of lands and possessions. And no, that’s not a crime. But if he’s wealthy, it means he operates in a world where he has access and privileges that most people don’t. This man of means is entitled to inherit – to be given by right – lands, and taxes, and power, and all the trappings of the vassal system. And if you operate in such a system, whether you came into it by inheritance or hard work, odds are, you use a whole lot more I-language than we-language. And you mean to use your means.

I’ve been a good dude. I’ve played by the rules. What do I need to do in order to preserve all of these trappings with eternal longevity?

The Psalmist, when translated in the Hebrew Bible, proclaims, “The Lord is my shepherd. I lack nothing.”

Jesus, when talking to a self-proclaimed shepherd, this landowner, who believes his life's pursuit of preserving his lands and workers and possessions, and doing so all while keeping the basic commandments, is a model of communal love, proclaims, "You lack one thing."

"Sell your possessions," Jesus says. "Give the receipts to those who need it. Then you'll be wealthy in a proper way, and you can come and follow me."

I don't doubt the wealthy man's sincerity. Really, I don't. I think this man is as eager as any of us to find what will provide ultimate meaning in this world and beyond. The problem is, for people of privilege, and I certainly count myself in such company, we often use I-language, wondering what it is we need to do as individuals, in order that we might receive what's coming our way. We use our wealth of knowledge, or wealth of access, or wealth of resources, or wealth of good timing to act as if it's this very wealth that allows us to leverage communion with God.

But here's the thing. We don't do one thing, or multiple things, or really anything to enter the kin-dom of God. God is not an entity to do for, or to possess, or to please. God is an entity to be loved and received. It's God that does the doing. And it's God's doing to us, and with us, and for us, and our willingness to receive such doing, that offers ultimate meaning and fulfillment.

Here's what I'm getting at. The wealthy man in today's story understands the world to be place of entitlement and performance. As a person of means, when he does something performative, he expects to receive what he's entitled to. And why, he wonders, should God be any different than me?

But God's world turns performance upside down. In this world, wealth provides an avenue to help our neighbors, but it also requires our neighbors to remain dependent and beholden to the source of that wealth. Jesus asks, "Why not relinquish wealth in a way that provides for your neighbors AND releases your need to make your wealth the sole source of your value?" For if all are enough in God, what need is there to seek enough-ness in things not of God?

That wasn't the answer the wealthy man expected, and it wasn't the one he wanted to hear. And I suspect it's often not the answer we want to hear either.

The text tells us this man was “shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

And again, when we read this text in a hurry, we consider this the end of the story. We assume this was a bridge too far for the wealthy man. And besides, he’s got a whole lot of stuff on his camel, and there ain’t no way he’s gonna slip through the eye of the needle.

But I don’t think the wealthy man quit on Jesus, nor do I think Jesus was scolding him. As a matter of fact, the text tells us Jesus both looked at and loved the man in his response. I like to believe that this wealthy man being shocked and grieved was a transitional moment, a re-centering moment, the beginning of a new journey and calling. I don’t think this man lost his eagerness for discipleship. I simply think he left that encounter wondering how he could free himself from a world of performance and entitlement. Maybe, for the first time ever, this man of means was about to experience a world where he had to let go of control, learn how to become interdependent with his neighbors, and leave behind the transactional nature of his daily dealings. I really want to believe that the man left that place with a deep curiosity and desire to answer the question, “What is that one thing I’m lacking?”

And honestly, I really hope we’ll leave here today asking the very same question. What are we lacking, Sardis? Yes, we claim to know the Shepherd God, even sit at Her table now and again. And while we should not want, we still do. And though we lack nothing, we perceive to lack too much. What, friends, prevents us from joining and enjoying God’s banquet, and prevents us from being eager to see our neighbors join and enjoy it, too?

We have hearts, and souls, and minds. And strength, too! Do we need more than that to love God? Do we need more than that to love our neighbors as we love ourselves?

Jesus is on a journey. He’s not setting out to do stuff in order that he might procure more. Instead, Jesus has determined to be present in the presence of God in order that he might experience and receive life abundant. Good friends, in

**Man of Means**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**20<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 23, 10/8/2021**  
**Mark 10:17-31**



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

the days ahead, may we discern, discover, and discard whatever substance it is that prevents us from following Jesus.

I'd say it's okay to be shocked, even grieved to discover that such a substance exists for each one of us. But if the Jesus story tells us anything, it's that God has a way of resurrecting, recreating, revitalizing life, and energy, and purpose in each one of us. Not to mention, God offers an impossible grace to counterbalance the predictable stubbornness of a performative world.

I hear there's a boxcar, third one on the train, destination Bangor, Maine. What do you reckon it would take for us to give up our means, perhaps become people of means by no means, kings and queens of the road, and follow Jesus in service of our neighbors, and with an openness to discover what God has in store for our lives?

I'd imagine it starts with same discernment as that wealthy neighbor who departed the company of a loving Jesus long ago. Good friends, may we follow that man, and eventually, Jesus, too!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.