

An Overlooked Lesson

The account of the rich young ruler's interview with Jesus has been the basis for many lessons that I have taught through the years. It pictures to us an admirable, sincere, and God-fearing young man who disappointed Jesus, and us, because he loved his wealth more than his soul. He should have been willing to sell what he had and to give it to the poor in following Jesus. At least, that is what I thought!

Though Jesus was warning of the peril of riches, that is not his main lesson. I overlooked the most important lesson. Even though I could belittle the fellow for unwillingness to sell everything and give it to the poor, I went on to "explain away" such an actual requirement for us except for laying a little guilt and uncertainty. After all, Peter did not tell inquirers on Pentecost, "Repent, be baptized, sell all that you have, and give it to the poor in order to be saved!"

The main point of the recorded encounter is not concerning the use of wealth but the answer to the question, "Who can be saved?" We have felt disappointment when the fine young man turned away sorrowfully choosing to keep his possessions instead of following Jesus. Jesus, however, as I see it now, was disappointed by the man's very first question.

"Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" he inquired respectfully. Jesus saw his need for better understanding, so he started with, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments." "Which?" "You shall not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness and honor your parents and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus' disappointment in the young inquirer grows as he answers, "All these I have observed; what do I still lack?" Wow! What a fine man! Who could find a more exemplary character? He seemed to have his head on straight, with everything in balance and in his favor while still eager to meet any other requirement. If he was not saved, what chance could such a person as I have?

Let's go back to the start of the story. "What good deed must I do?" Not, "What must I do?" There are requirements of us, but no good deed can suffice. Perhaps he was willing to buy new cushions for the pews, build a new synagogue, or start a fund for poor widows. Great! But no one can gain forgiveness of sins through even the greatest works of self-sacrifice.

So Jesus stretched him further. "Keep the commandments." Now, we are talking! We are on the right track, aren't we? Disappointment again! He should have responded, "Jesus, you know that I cannot keep all the commandments perfectly. Besides, you know that commandments do not offer life. Our great law given by Moses did not offer life, for law cannot give life. It condemns but cannot forgive." Instead, the young man responded like we commonly do by refusing to admit his inability to keep law. A sort of "humble self-righteousness" was his shaky claim to eternal life. His lack of confidence in that led him to seek confirmation from Jesus. I have been in the same boat, haven't you?

"All right," Jesus challenges him further, "since you keep the letter of the law by not killing, stealing, and such, how about the spirit of the law – the greatest of laws/principles – that of unselfish use of all you have in demonstrating love for your neighbor as for yourself?" "That's too much! I give up. You are making unreal demands, Jesus."

In reality, Jesus was not making those demands. He was trying to convince the young man that his own approach to the gaining of eternal life was wrong. He, himself, had set that standard. It was beyond human

achievement. The young man could see no further than his own abilities, good works, and keeping of rules. He did not even know the next question to ask!

The disciples asked the next question. After the young man went away, Jesus further emphasized that riches cannot buy the way into the kingdom of heaven any sooner than a camel can go through the eye of a sewing needle.

Seeing that a person like the young man who seemed to have every good quality in his favor could not be saved, the perplexed disciples asked in doubting astonishment, "Who then can be saved?"

"With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible!" Wow! There is the long-overlooked lesson! How did I miss it so many years? Man cannot do enough good deeds, keep enough commandments, and demonstrate enough benevolence to save himself. But God can save the man of such admirable qualities, or one of lesser qualities, by his grace through the atonement of Jesus.

At any point in the narrative, if the rich young ruler had asked Jesus for salvation instead of giving his resume of his own works of achievement which he thought were required, no doubt, Jesus' answer would have been drastically different. "Believe in me, and I will give you life. Take my yoke upon you. It is light. Not a burdensome, galling load of constant demands of achievement. Fulfilling love is not burdensome. It is a joy rather than an enslaving burden. I will give you rest from such impossible demands."

Why did not Jesus call the disillusioned inquirer back and explain grace to him? We can only conjecture. Jesus probably knew that his heart and mind were not ready for such a challenging revelation. We may gain some comfort in thinking that later the young man came to understand what Jesus was preparing his mind to receive. He might have been among the 3000 who responded on Pentecost.

For all of us, like those disciples who had left all to follow Jesus, there will be multiplied and satisfying rewards in addition to the eternal life Jesus offered.

These comments are based on the account in Matthew 19:16-30 with no effort to cover each detail or to compare the accounts in Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30. (January 2001) []

