

Texts: Mark 10:17-31

Subject: Jesus and the Rich Man

Theme: There's Something Missing

1 Lent; Mar. 1, 2020, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

Looking ahead to the weeks to come, we see Jesus accompanying his disciples on the way to Jerusalem in Mark's Good News, giving them *the* masterclass on what it means to be His disciple. He embodies for them practices that we can embrace as followers too. They are: teaching, serving and healing, giving, telling and loving, and trusting. This week I see Jesus teaching what it means to be a follower the Messiah - and it might seem like a hard lesson for us.

You might know this story well - it's often recalled as the story of the rich young ruler, or the the rich man and Jesus, but knowing that ahead of time spoils the ending. The first ones to hear this wouldn't have known of the man's financial status until the end of the lesson. They were, like the man himself, expecting the world to be turned upside down - the Kingdom of God to be launched into reality by the Messiah - the one the prophets spoke about - in a time when justice would come for those who oppressed the people, when Israel would finally be free, and God would rule, and the world would be renewed. They weren't asking what would happen after their death, but how to live in the new and coming Kingdom. Some teachers would interpret the law and give the answer - "this is how you should live, this is who you should follow, this is how to join the winning team."

Jesus refers back to the law - the Ten Commandments - with one addition. He says, "You know this: don't kill, don't cheat, steal, lie, don't defraud, honor your parents."

The man is elated. He's kept the law, Surely he'll be in. Not so fast, my friend. (and don't call me Shirley.) *There's something missing.*

Jesus looks at him and loves him.

Wow. It's one of my favorite verses in scripture. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Put that on your tombstone, people. If they never say anything else about me, let someone say that. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." or her. or them. Jesus responds to this man's testimony - he's obeyed the law, since he was young - without doubt, but with knowing and grace. The lesson has already begun. There's one thing missing - he tells him to sell all that owns - give the money to poor, and then to come along for the mission ahead. The same invitation he offered his disciples, the sons of Zebedee, "Come and follow me."

We might look at this man and see ego - he thinks he's followed the law so well? Why does he ask the question? Who is this guy? Yet he seeks Jesus out - he had to ask, "Jesus, what do *you* say I should do?"

As the oldest child in my family, I often felt a distinct weight of responsibility. I always saw it as my role to set the example, achieve, work hard, follow the rules - most of the time, and do things the right way. I don't know if that was taught explicitly, or just inferred on my part, or as a means of survival, but especially growing up, it's what I would cling to. So I got good grades, joined the Boy Scouts, helped out around the neighborhood, cared for my siblings. As I got older and moved away from the family, those efforts just became a part of my character. I was a good guy. After some living and learning, I found myself longing for something more. *There was something missing.*

I still remember driving down from East Hollywood, through Wilshire center to the radio station in Koreatown at night, alone, angry. I was working three jobs to survive in Los Angeles, and had been through a difficult break up. I was brokenhearted, frustrated, and afraid. I prayed as I drove. I told myself I would find a church, I would seek out God. In that moment, I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders and a peace come over me. The pain I was wallowing in, was mostly self-inflicted. I thought I had failed, as the older responsible brother, the one who had it all together, to one who would be a great success. I was drowning in my own stupid ego. God didn't let me stay there. It would be a few more years before I finally found a church where I could belong, but I learned - I'm still learning - that my life was not about doing anything, but is about giving my life away.

“Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

Jesus looks at the man, and calls him to come and follow. It would mean freedom, a new family, a new way of being, but first the old life had to go away. “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come and follow me.” That's all it takes people! Sell it all! I don't know how many of you follow the stock market, but I don't think all those sell orders this week are so that people can run and follow Jesus - are they? But Jesus asks this man for a market correction - the way you've been going isn't my way. We're going to Jerusalem. Wanna come?

The man was shocked! and went away in grief, “for he had many possessions.” The things he owned, owned him. Jesus offers to liberate the man from the burden of his wealth. How much did he have? A lot. We can only imagine. The ask was too much for him, and he went away, back to his old life, back to whatever it was that drove him

out in the first place to find another way. Back to the routine, the status quo, the life he was living before he encountered the Living God. Had he really followed the law?

We fool ourselves so easily. When we think we're good, when we think we've followed the rules, when we think we've done everything right, the Word calls us to account for the way we live, the law still catches up to us. Jesus begins the conversation with a question, "why do you call me good?" then doesn't mention taking the Lord's name in vain - "only God is good." Mark tells the story and includes among the commandments, "do not defraud." One scholar notes that the man's wealth may have come at the cost of his neighbor. Jesus looks at the man, sees his sin, and loves him anyway.

I don't expect many of you will go today and sell everything that you have and give the money to the poor. But if you'd like to, the ushers will be standing by, just in case. The truth is we're missing something too. Our will is still bound to sin, we are still unable to fully be as we were created to be, unafraid, unselfish, fully trusting in the goodness of God, especially if we've already suffered, already been hurt by the world, and the people in it. We are unable to do for ourselves what is really needed.

When we examine ourselves we tend to gloss over the ways we've failed to live up to the law. But we might as well name it. We've forgotten God, we lied, cheated, stolen, committed murder with words and thoughts. Our intentions are the best - *for us*. We want what we do not have, and we burn with rage, jealousy, and fear eats us alive. We work to please others and covet what they have earned. In our hubris, we think we deserve salvation.

Jesus explains how impossible it is for those who have wealth to enter into the Kingdom of God. It's "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." Not going to happen, God knows. We *are* ones with wealth. As a culture, we are. Some of us here have more than others, that's true, but as a collective people, we are wealthier than most of the world. It's why we read stories of incredible generosity and take notice. Read about this: "Birmingham Church to forgive \$7-8 million in medical debt for families across Alabama"¹ It's beautiful, right? That's the kind of turning the world upside down kind of action that gets attention, because it is rare.

The reaction of the disciples - Peter is a stand in for our voices here - tells us all we need to know. "Look at us, Jesus! Look how good we are!" Jesus looks at him and loves him, no doubt. "Sure, Peter," he seems to say. It's true that when you truly leave your *self* behind and live for the sake of the Good News, you'll be living the Jesus way. What will it take for us, I wonder?

What is missing in your life? What is missing in our life together?

There is Good News here - Jesus doesn't leave the man. He loved him. He promises to give all that is needed to those who truly follow him, now and in the life to come. It won't be easy, though. There will be pain and suffering endured for those who live for Jesus in a world that can't follow him.

Some look forward to a new age, for a new leader to be inaugurated, perhaps. Some look to the horizon to find the justice and peace we're missing. Some look all over the world to find the thing that's missing. For our new family, for our true home, Jesus calls us to look to him. For new life, Jesus says to trust in Him, to follow the way of

¹ <https://abc3340.com/news/local/birmingham-church-to-forgive-7-8-million-in-medical-debt-for-families-across-alabama>

discipleship, and to look to the cross. It's empty, along with the tomb - Jesus has been raised up already, and we have been given the gift of salvation, even though we don't deserve it. We have been baptized. The old ego, the old ways you've lived and all your sins have been drowned in that water and with the Word and you are raised up to live in the abundant life Christ promises and delivers. It's here and now. Your treasure is in heaven, and yet we live here, so we're given responsibilities: to care for others and the world God made, to work for justice, to welcome the stranger, to feed the poor.

I found a church that welcomed me, took me in, shared with me, nurtured me in prayer and helped to teach me God's Word and Jesus' way. I heard the good news that when I feel the weight of the law catching up to me I can know that God's grace in Jesus was for me. There I found something that was missing in my life, and felt Jesus looking at me, loving me.

The Word is still calling us to be the church, to see the ways we can still turn from ourselves, to trust in the goodness and grace of God, and follow Jesus to the cross. Until that day when we see Him face to face, we'll still be striving against our selfishness, but we've already received the Spirit of God, and in faith we follow the teacher. Maybe we'll learn a little along the way.

Amen.