

The Bequest

Mark 10:17-27

October 11, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

Mark 10:17-27 ¹⁷ As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸ Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹ Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²² When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. ²³ Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is¹ to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another,¹ "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

What do *The Wall Street Journal* and the Bible have in common?

They both expend a lot of ink talking about money. We think of those two publications representing vastly different realms – one decidedly secular and the other profoundly spiritual, one obsessed with financial gain and the other with spiritual enrichment – but when we think that way, we are not thinking theologically about life. As Christians we affirm that this is God's world and all we have has come from the gracious hand of our Creator, but then we turn around and neatly segment aspects of our lives into neat piles that never address one another.

This so-called "secular" concept is found in various forms throughout scripture. The word *wealth* appears up in the Bible (NRSV translation) 27 times, the word *rich* 80 times, the word *money* 147 times, and *gold*, a metaphor for financial prosperity if there ever was one, 417 times. As for

our friends at *The Wall Street Journal*, they are not without insight as to how all things hang together and where what matters most in life lies. As an editorial in one edition of the *Journal* put it, “Money is an article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven, and as a universal provider of everything except happiness.”

Happiness – it’s a pursuit that seems to be on everyone’s mind in these distressed times. For those who are unemployed, those losing their homes, those suffering tragic personal losses, and for each of us in the common ups-and-downs of our moods and outlooks, fortunes and misfortunes, these are drear days. The whole nation is hunkered down over their bank statements. We are consulting gurus, snatching self-help and advice books off the bookstore shelves, tuning in to the latest advice programming, and longing for prosperity, which – we think – will make us happy. Despite the *Journal*’s acknowledgement that money can’t buy it, we can’t help shopping around for it.

Well, happiness – or, at least our perceptions of it – has come under scientific scrutiny in recent years. Science hasn’t been able to precisely define happiness – after all, along with falling in love and dreaming, happiness is a highly personal and individual state. What researchers have discovered, however, is that we are very bad at predicting what will make us happy and incorrect, in any event, at assuming happiness can be attached to a particular possession or situation.

This appeared in a *New York Times* report: “*If Daniel Gilbert [a leading researcher in the field] is right, then you are wrong. ... You are wrong to believe that a new car will make you as happy as you imagine. You are wrong to believe that a new kitchen will make you happy for as long as you imagine. You are wrong to think that you will be more unhappy with a*

big single setback (a broken wrist, a broken heart) than with a lesser chronic one (a trick knee, a tense marriage). You are wrong to assume that job failure will be crushing. You are wrong to expect that a death in the family will leave you bereft for year upon year, forever and ever. You are even wrong to reckon that a cheeseburger you order in a restaurant... will definitely hit the spot. That's because when it comes to predicting exactly how you will feel in the future, you are most likely wrong."

"Our research simply says that whether it's the thing that matters or the thing that doesn't, both of them matter less than you think they will," [Gilbert} says. "Things that happen to you or that you buy or own -- as much as you think they make a difference to your happiness...you're overestimating how much of a difference they make. None of them make the difference you think. And that's true of positive and negative events." [NY Times, 9/7/2003]

Happiness – the transient, elusive butterfly that it is – is our modern preoccupation. The thing we need to understand is that our lives will expand in depth and breadth no further than the dimensions of our questions. We sell God’s gift of life short when we ask small questions. We need to ask more weighty ones than “what will make me happy?” If the research is right, and we are chronically incapable of judging what it is that brings happiness anyway, let’s ask, instead, “what makes us whole, what makes our life congruent with the purposes for which we were given life?” – in other words, what brings us into fuller relationship with God, which I suggest as a working description of what the man who comes to Jesus asked when he inquires about inheriting eternal life.

Let’s ask the big questions. Let’s move beyond limited and short-sighted concerns. The New Testament talks little about happiness or

prosperity; it talks much about blessedness and fully participating in the coming reign of God. If money, as *The Wall Street Journal* tells us, can take us anywhere but heaven and give us anything but happiness, bigger questions – like how do I participate in God’s desire for the life of the world? what will bring about the just and loving community God is seeking to build? how can I follow Jesus? – are left hanging there unasked and unanswered because we keep pressing the issue in the same old ways. If “this” amount of money isn’t making me happy, then “that” much greater amount no doubt will. If being the wealthiest nation in the world doesn’t bring peace, prosperity, and prevailing goodwill across the globe, then, no doubt, we’re just not rich enough yet!

Jesus’ first response to the man concerns *goodness*. “Good Teacher...,” the man calls Jesus, an adjective Jesus quickly dismisses. Goodness, we are told up front, is a preliminary issue but not the main issue in this matter of eternal life. The temptation is strong to think that all God wants of us is righteousness. We approach ethics like we approach our finances and keep an accounting of our good deeds as though they are deposits in a heavenly savings account. Give us a check-list of things we must do, and keep it simple, we say.

But take a second look at the man who comes to Jesus. First of all, it may not be the best interpretation of the text to call the man wealthy. The New Revised Translation of scripture says, “...and [the man] went away grieving, for [the man] had many possessions.” In the original Greek the word translated as *many possessions* can mean “having everything one needs.” I’m wondering if this man wasn’t simply the typical Presbyterian, comfortable in means but a bit embarrassed about it and gnawed at by the feeling that there must be something more to life than being comfortable.

Let's consider that the man was one much like us, because if he is rich – and someone is “rich” if they are perceived to have more than we have – then it is easy for us to dismiss him as someone of another species, not like us, and so we arrange it that we don't have to feel this lesson's bite. If he is like us, however, then he is our stand-in raising the question we should be raising, admitting that there is – as Jesus put it – something “lacking” in the way we are living. This man is an earnest, faithful, spiritually sensitive man who has followed the rules but never found the satisfaction he sought.

We don't know what becomes of him; we have only this little vignette from his life. He went away from Jesus, a gloom settled upon him because he has been challenged at the root of his dissatisfaction and the call has come to change his outlook, dismantle his old spiritual foundations, and seek a new way of living under God. Perhaps he did. Perhaps he learned to expand his life by not letting his sufficiency get in the way of perceiving his need. Perhaps he learned a larger vision and a more grace-centered life, one which no longer sought to earn his way into God's presence but simply accept the grace God offered as one of his children. And perhaps he learned to give away that which, until then, had artificially propped him up, and sought anew those invisible means of support which have sustained Jesus' disciples ever since he said, “Follow me!”

Inheriting the kingdom of God has nothing to do with lists and accomplishments; it has everything to do with the heart and soul. You can be a miser and still follow the Ten Commandments, for instance. You can be xenophobic, homophobic, misogynistic, and generally an unpleasant person to be around and still follow the commandments. It is better to be righteous than evil, and better to observe the commandments than not observe them, of course. But none of this is enough, for God requires more

than our righteousness. God requires our very selves. And, thank God, it is not according to our righteousness that we are reckoned as God's children. Rather, we are fellow heirs with Jesus of God's gracious goodness simply because God loves us.

It is not righteousness, but grace, that is at issue in the kingdom of heaven. It is not goodness that makes us acceptable to God; it is generosity. The man who comes to Jesus wants to make his spiritual inheritance a matter of accomplishment. "What must I *do* to inherit...." he asks – again, showing that he's a good Presbyterian. We are actors, doers, busy as bees and even more industrious, scurrying hither and fro, little dust clouds of accomplishment being kicked up at our feet.

And so we ask what must I do...what must I think...what should I know? But Jesus tells us that these aren't the right questions. The one true question is, "Who must I *be* to inherit eternal life?" And the right answer is we must be persons who will what God wills. We must be persons willing to shed all self-concern, all pretenses, all poses of righteousness and goodness, all attempts to earn God's affections and accept the freely-given grace of God which makes us whole. And we must posture ourselves to consistently give away what we have so that the world may experience God's grace. These are hard words. These are hard teachings. These represent struggles of a lifetime.

In scripture, wealth is never condemned, only its mastery over us. As Wesley said, "Earn all you can; give away all you can." Being rich is not the problem; making our riches more important than anything else is the ultimate problem. Like one of those restaurants where, if you have to ask the price of the meal, you probably can't afford it, the man coming to Jesus asks a question whose answer he's not prepared to live with, even if it's the

only way to have life at all. He thinks he wants to inherit eternal life, but it turns out he wants to be his own heir, inheriting his own little Kingdom of Having and Holding. He has become his own jailer.

What must we do to inherit – that is, be acceptable? Righteousness is not irrelevant, but it is not central. What is central is giving up our futile attempts to be our own god, giving up on building our own kingdoms, and give our hearts to the one God who knows how to care for it. We do inherit when we are fellow heirs with Christ.

Soren Kierkegaard, in his treatise *Works of Love*, writes, “Owe no one anything except to love one another...pay everyone everything you owe him; the person to whom you owe a tax, pay the tax; him to whom you owe a fee, pay the fee; to whom fear, fear; to whom honor, honor. ...If possible, owe no one anything, no obligation, no service, no sympathy in joy or sorrow, no leniency in judging, no help in life, no advice in dangers, no sacrifice, even the most difficult...no, in all these things owe no one anything. But nevertheless, be in the debt which amid all this you have by no means desired to get out of and before God have by no means been able to pay off, the debt of love to one another.”

Let God’s love be the only influence on our affluence, and we will live.