

When Everything Means Nothing

Mark 10:17-31

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In one infamous episode of the gameshow Deal or No Deal, Richie Bell played until only the \$1 and \$1,000,000 cases were left. He declined to exchange his suitcase, and refused the offer presented to him (“No deal!”) and ended up with only \$1. Likewise in Mark 10:17-31 we see a rich young ruler who held on to what he had and refused to exchange it for something whose worth was so much greater than he realized. He would not give up his worldly wealth for eternal life. This story is much more than just a tragic decision. It speaks of our human condition. Because this story makes us uncomfortable, we often read this story and dismiss it as irrelevant to us. But it does apply to us, and it should make us uncomfortable.

The first issue we see with this rich young ruler is his confidence in himself. First he is confident in his own definition of what is good. He measures what is good by achievements. He thinks he has achieved some level of righteousness and sees Jesus as merely a teacher who has similarly achieved this status of being good. Jesus immediately challenges him and says that no one is good except God. Jesus is not denying that He is good, but challenges the ruler’s definition of what is good, and his understanding of who Jesus is. Jesus is good because He is the Son of God, not just an accomplished teacher. Second, in vv. 19-20 we see this ruler is confident in his own goodness. He claims to follow all the commandments that Jesus lists. But note Jesus only lists the second half of the Ten Commandments, and leaves out the ones pertaining to our relationship with God. Our vertical relationship with God is the root of our horizontal relationship with others. This is what is lacking in the young ruler. He uses his own standard of righteousness instead of God’s, and therefore can’t see how he falls short. It’s easy to say you’re good if your standard is just not being like Hitler. So Jesus challenges this man give up everything and follow Him. He does this to make him uncomfortable and to make him realize that he is far from being able to earn his way to eternal life.

Jesus’ response creates conflict within this rich young ruler. But we see in v. 21 that Jesus loved him. Jesus challenged him out of love. The one thing this man was missing was to give up everything. This man thought he had everything. He accumulated wealth, and he thought he accumulated some kind of merit through good works. Jesus tells him to leave the past behind, look to the future age to come, and follow Him in the present. Jesus asks for full allegiance. In v.

22 we see the young ruler is conflicted, and thus he walks away in sorrow. He walked away from the only source of true joy in order to be miserable with his belongings. It seems foolish, but it's surprising how many people say they would rather be rich and miserable than poor and joyful. This man just didn't believe Jesus was worth it. In his society, his wealth was seen as God's blessing or even a reward for righteousness. But this man's reliance on himself and his achievements is what prevented him from following Jesus. And his wealth bound him to this world. So Jesus says in v. 23 that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It's too easy for the rich to trust in their wealth for security rather than in God. It's too easy for the rich to focus on the things of the world rather than on eternal things, to serve money rather than God. Wealth so easily blinds us and makes us think we don't need God. But all the wealth we accumulate in this life is worthless in the next. For most of us in this area, we are in the top 5-10%. So this warning definitely applies to us.

Sometimes we read this story and think if we just give some more to the poor we have satisfied Jesus' requirement and can pat ourselves on the back. But that's not the point. Jesus even says that the requirement is meant to be impossible. That's why the disciples are so amazed and ask who then can be saved. So Jesus offers some clarity. In v. 27 Jesus says that with man this is impossible, but all things are possible with God. We cannot earn salvation, but can only freely receive it from God. When faced with an impossible task we can either be driven towards despair or dependence. Adults so often deceive themselves into thinking that they are so capable and competent, and that can do anything. However children quickly realize what they can't do. This is why in the passage right before this story, Mark 10:13-16, Jesus says that only those who are like children can enter the kingdom of God. We must be humble like children, not relying on our own effort or our accumulated resources, but rather relying on God. We must learn to say that we can't do it. John 6:37 and 44 tell us that it is God who draws us near. We cannot approach Him on our own.

Finally, Jesus offers comfort to Peter, who asks what is left for him and the other disciples who did leave everything for Jesus. Peter still didn't get it. He thought he could earn rewards by giving up possessions. But Jesus says that their reward will be a hundredfold. The rewards Jesus talks about are primarily relationships, brothers and sisters, and a new home in the body of Christ. Jesus gives a final warning in v. 31 that those who are first in this world because they refuse to let go of their worldly treasure will be last in the age to come. So let us approach

Jesus like children. Let us not cling to our accomplishments or accumulated wealth but rather let us cling to Jesus, who can bring us into His kingdom.