

Reading from the Gospels: Mark 10:17-31

Camels, Needles and Salvation

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In February 2001, John Oros spoke to an audience at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary about his experience as a church leader in Romania during the Communist era: During communism, he said, many of us preached...and people came at the end of a service, and they said, "I have decided to become a Christian."

We told them, "It is good that you want to become a Christian, but we would like to tell you that there is a price to be paid. Why don't you reconsider what you want to do, because many things can happen to you. You can lose, and you can lose big."

A high percentage of these people chose to take part in a three-month catechism class. At the end of this period, many participants declared their desire to be baptized. Typically, I would respond, "It is really nice that you want to become a Christian, but when you give your testimony...there will be informers here who will jot down your name. Tomorrow the problems will start. Count the cost. Christianity is not easy. It's not cheap. You can be demoted. You can lose your job. You can lose your friends. You can lose your neighbors. You can lose your kids who are climbing the social ladder. You can lose even your life."

Let me tell you my joy—when we looked into their eyes, and their eyes were in tears, and they told us, "If I lose everything but my personal relationship with my Lord Jesus Christ, it is still worth it." (*Brent Kipfer, Brussels, Ontario, Preaching Today*)

The cost of true discipleship is not cheap. Unfortunately, like a young man found out in talking to Jesus, most of us don't have any idea what that cost really is. I'm pretty sure that most of us weren't worried about being persecuted when we were baptized and accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. But all discipleship is costly.

So the question becomes ... do you every wonder what that cost is to you? Listen with me to our Gospel lesson this morning from the 10th chapter of Mark, verses 17-31. You might be surprised to find yourself in this story.

10:17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

10:18 Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.

10:19 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.' "

10:20 He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

10:21 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."

10:22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

10:23 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!"

10:24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!

10:25 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."

10:26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

10:27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

10:28 Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

10:29 Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news,

10:30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

10:31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This is the word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Some say he was lucky. Others say he just did everything the right way ... he followed the law ... he never killed anyone ... he didn't run around behind his wife's back ... he was known to be honest, never stealing even a matzoth ball ... he certainly didn't go around gossiping and spreading rumors about other employees down at the temple exchange office ... and he was the pride and joy of his mother and father ... a good Jewish boy ... Now by all indications, he was truly blessed.

Blessed because he had everything anyone could ask for. By most standards, he was rich ... he had land ... he had some cattle and goats ... he had servants ... his house was even

featured once in *Southern Hebrew*. You don't get to his status of life by breaking the commandments ... you get there by following the rules and obeying God and being blessed.

Yet something was still missing in his life. Something gnawed deep inside him. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. There had to be more to life than just working hard and making a bunch of denarii ... getting rich. In spite of everything he had ... he still wasn't satisfied with his life. Something was missing.

Because when he looked around at the state of other people's lives, he knew he had much ... even when so many had so little. But hadn't it always been that way ... some seemed to have been abundantly blessed ... and some ... well, they fell a bit short of being blessed ... of being successful. Of course he knew it wasn't his fault.

In fact, there was probably nothing he could do but learn to live with it. Even his rabbi down at the synagogue always seemed to tell him the same thing. If it made him feel any better, give a bigger offering on the next Sabbath. He tried that ... the feeling deep in side didn't go away. However, he had heard about a band of men who were traveling in his region of Judea.

They were led by a rabbi who didn't work out of a synagogue. If anything, the stories he heard painted them as a radical itinerant group that spread a message of hope for those who had so little. The poor, the lame, the sick were all attracted to this charismatic leader. They mobbed him wherever he went. The rich man even heard how this rabbi turned the law upside down and offered a way of life that relied less on laws and more on love and compassion toward one another.

He didn't know what it was ... but that seemed to warm his heart in a way he had never experienced. Maybe ... just maybe ... this rabbi could fill what was missing in his life. And sure enough ... early one morning he found him in the countryside. The group of them was getting ready to head out for the day. Their leader, their rabbi's name was Jesus.

The young man boldly approached him, knelt before Jesus and asked him a simple question ... "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Like most of us ... I think he was hoping for something short and sweet ... a quick answer that would satisfy all of his questions about life and fill that void deep within him. Maybe Jesus would hand him a self-help book and tell him the answer was in there ... or Jesus would pronounce some sort of blessing and the man would learn to live quite peaceably with himself and all of his stuff.

But for Jesus ... this is a teachable moment. First, Jesus gives the young man a glimpse into his real identity ... "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." And then he connects with the young man and his Jewish heritage by rattling off a series of commandments ... all of which the man proudly boasts that he has kept since being a young boy.

His naïve response brings a smile to Jesus' face ... he loves him as a father loves a child ... because he's trying so hard to do what is right. And then ... just as he did for those other disciples ... and just as he does for each one of us ... Jesus issues a call to follow him.

But it is a difficult call ... a call that rocks the foundation of this young man's world ... , "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."

Well ... it is a simple answer ... but its complexity defies understanding for most of us. Because Jesus' answer touches the single raw nerve that sends shivers up our spines ... money ... and all the stuff that is associated with it. Because like the young Jewish man, we might identify ourselves to each other as Christians ... but the reality is that our identity is shaped and controlled and manipulated by our money and our possessions.

Money and all the stuff that goes with it speak volumes about who we are ... how much power we have ... how high we are able to ascend the social ranks of society ... we may call ourselves Christian ... American ... white, African American, native American, or any other ethnicity or color ... but at its core ... money defines more about us than anything else.

So what do you think happens to this young man whom Jesus tells to sell it all and give it to the poor and follow him as a disciple? Well, when most of us hear how he responded ... "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" ... we just assume that Jesus has asked him to do too much. There is obviously no way he is going to be able to do what Christ asks of him.

And we just assume that when Jesus himself points out, it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God ... that he's referring to that young man. However ... I would like to disagree with that assumption. I actually believe that this young man did precisely what Jesus asked him to do.

Of course he was shocked ... of course he was grieving ... he was about to give up everything in his life in which his identity was based upon. Can you begin to imagine how difficult this was going to be for him? All of his life he followed the rules and the laws and everyone told him he was good ... so he just assumed he was being blessed by God with his rich abundance ... but deep inside he knew ... he knew that wasn't true ... and it bothered him ... it bothered him deeply.

And he also knew that all of his "stuff" in which he thought he was proving his worth to the world. . . was actually a false identity . . . and Christ was calling him to drop the façade ... Christ was calling him to let go of everything that he believed brought him security and comfort and self-confidence and worth ... to let go of it all ... and just take a giant leap of faith and follow him. And if you don't think that would cause a lot of shock and grief ... then the point of this story is probably alluding you.

Richard J. Foster, the Christian writer, hits the nail right on the head when he writes

“When we let go of money, we are letting go of part of ourselves and part of our security. But this is precisely why it is important to do it. It is one way to obey Jesus' command to deny ourselves... . When we give money, we are releasing a little more of our egocentric selves and a little more of our false security. ... Giving frees us to care.

It produces an air of expectancy as we anticipate what God will lead us to give. It makes life with God an adventure in the world, and that is worth living for and giving for.”
(Richard J. Foster, quoted in "Reflections," *Christianity Today*)

Make no mistake about it ... Discipleship is costly ... it will cost you your life. And when you lose it ... you will gain everything. Christ tells us so. Would you be willing to accept such a call to follow Christ? Would you be willing to risk everything in your life, like those Romanian Christians, to boldly declare Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Would you be willing, like that young Jewish man ... to give up everything to humbly follow Christ?

We all have to wrestle with that question. And the reward ... only God's knows ... eternal life is not ours to be earned ... because the question the young man asked ... what do I need to do to inherit eternal life? ... is not answered with steps one through 10 in the manual of life ... it is answered purely and simply in the grace of Jesus Christ.

But out of God's grace comes our response through discipleship ... costly discipleship. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer powerfully reminds us that God's grace is not cheap ... Cheap grace, he says, is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace ... is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer in The Cost of Discipleship.*)

I would like to close with a poem I read this week ... It is a reminder of the cost of discipleship.

kneeling, i ask
what can i do
to get that Christmas present:
- play nice with my kid sister;
- put away my toys at night;
- eat (all!?!?) my vegetables?

what should i do
to deserve a brighter day:
- whistle rather than whine;
- smile at that person i'd like to smack;
- put a dollar (nothing smaller in my pocket, darn it!)

in the handler of the pan?

what must i do to earn eternal life:
- not let my eyes wander over another;
- cough that gossip germ into my elbow;
- drop enough sins so i can squeeze through the gate?

at the fragile edges of life,
where you lived and spoke
with the poor,
the possessed,
the children, the outcasts:
was that where you discovered
even you could not save
yourself

and,
let go of all that you were,
so that with God
every thing became
possible
for us?
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.