

October 11

What's Holding You Back?

Mark 10:17-31

A good man with a legitimate religious question approaches Jesus to talk about his eternal destiny. The man knows and keeps the Commandments. He is the epitome of what faithful people should be like in Jesus day. Yet deep down he knows something is missing. Just like John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, he came to an awareness that faith was more than following the rules. Doing this doesn't bring you true joy and peace or an assurance of God's promises of eternal life. He knew that there must be more to do but he didn't know what was missing. Something was holding him back. Hearing Jesus teach must have struck a chord deep within him. Here may be the one who could answer his question and so he asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." Upon questioning, Jesus finds out that he knows and has followed the rules. It also says that Jesus loved him. Jesus saw his earnestness and his heart was touched. He could have asked his question in this way: "Jesus, what do I need to do to find peace in my soul and a real connection to the God I love?" Or he could have asked, "What is holding me back from full a full assurance of God's love?" He had a deep thirst that he knew Jesus could quench.

We wait for Jesus' response because so many times we could be that man. We know the rules of faithfulness. We have tried to follow them as best as we could but yet we know something is missing. We want more out of our faith than we are experiencing. We too want to know what more we need to do. When we hear what Jesus has to say we, like the young man in the story, are taken aback by Jesus' response. The man is told to sell what he has and give it to the poor and come follow Jesus. It is too much for this earnest seeker and he walks away from the presence of Jesus. What follows is a word from Jesus about how difficult it is for a rich person to get into the kingdom of heaven. Jesus realized that this man's love of money and the status it brings was what was holding him back. This is why Jesus would say to one whom he had developed an affection, get rid of your wealth. He met other rich men and did not require this kind of

sacrifice. Because he demanded it of this man it means that this was the answer to his question. Let's see why.

When we read it at first glance it may seem that this text is solely about money. Now while it is about money it is not exclusively about money. It is actually about idolatry. It is about that which stands between a person and God. In the Bible there are consistent warnings about the danger of false worship. Jesus saw the desire in the man's question. He also realized the importance he placed on his wealth. He realized that money had become his false idol and that is why he was challenged to sell all. It was the thing holding him back from being all he could be in God.

We need to realize that Jesus is not saying that the young man is sinful because he is wealthy. It is not wrong to have money. The young man is a sinner because he has a limited view of faith. His money is keeping him from truly trusting God. He was trusting it for his security instead of God. You might be thinking; where does sin come into this? The man was talking about finding eternal life not about sin. Sin is any action that separates you from God. He was feeling that separation. That is why he asked the question. He knew that he needed to do something to get right with God. In his case his money was the sin. We need to realize that his sin was about a value that he valued too much. This is a word of caution for all of us. When we place too high of a value on something so that it gets in the way of our truly living the gospel this is sin. It is these kinds of actions that cause the disconnect between us and God. It is the place where we have to move beyond following the rules to being in relationship. And that changes everything.

Jesus talks a lot about money. Jesus knew that there is something about riches that is spiritually hazardous. But the problem is not limited to money. Whatever we trust to save us is truly our god. It can be power, talent, beauty, intelligence, or a host of other things. We can give to these riches our heart and soul. We trust them, love them, pursue them, and promote them. They easily become the "one thing" that we may need to let go of in order to truly trust the Lord's grace.

The man in our story trusted money for his salvation. Many people in our society do the same thing. Money—not necessarily how much we have, but how we feel about it—governs the lives of some of us more than any other factor. Money and how we relate to it is important because behind money are very real spiritual forces that energize it and give it a life of its own. The rich young man's wealth was a rival god seeking his complete devotion. It had become an all-consuming idol and it had to be rejected totally. The rich young ruler had given almost all he had to the service of God. He lacked one thing, and Jesus gave him very practical and concrete instruction as to what to do with that one thing. Today's text invites us to get in touch with that which stands between us and God.

Let me share a couple of stories to get you thinking about those things that might stand between us and God. I remember reading about a young man whose goal in life was playing professional football. He devoted all his free time to the pursuit of this goal. He ate right, lifted weights, went to extra training camps. He was elated when a major college team invited him to play. It seemed as if his goal was in reach. The second year he was there he got involved in a hazing incident. He knew it was wrong. He felt guilty because it was against everything he stood for as a person and especially as a person of faith. But he went along because he was afraid of having his team mates turn against him. That could mean his not staying on the first team. His goal of being a professional athlete became his god and ultimately it destroyed his dream. He and fellow players were suspended and the college decided to withdraw its scholarship.

Here is one about money. A couple moved to town. He had been a very successful lawyer and soon after joining the church he let it be known that he had money and was willing to help out with some very necessary projects. It seemed, at first, to the church an answer to prayer for it, like most small churches, struggled financially. But it soon became apparent to all that there were strings attached to his giving. He let it be known that things needed to change in how the church did things if the funds were to continue. For the man, his money bought power and influence and that was what was most important to him, not helping his church. It was his false god. The church had an equally difficult quandary. What he wanted them to do wasn't bad or

immoral; it just wasn't what they were comfortable with. He wanted them to act like the church he came from and it was a large church and they were more comfortable with small family systems of doing things. The money was nice but at what price. Finally they decided that they were doing ministry in the best way they knew how and rejected his demands to change. The money dried up, he and his wife sold their home and left for a different, better place, and the church ultimately was o.k.

The Bible says Jesus loved the earnestly seeking rich man. It is this love Jesus feels for us that makes him intrude upon our carefully ordered ways of doing things. Jesus did not want the man to be poor; he wanted him to experience joy—the kind of joy that giving it all to God can bring to our lives. Jesus wants to intrude into our lives and challenge us to let go of those things that block us from full participation in the kingdom. This text is a good prescription for spiritual health. It challenges us to ask a different question. Not what must I do to gain eternal life, for this is “rules following,” but “What is holding me back from fully trusting and experiencing the love of God.” Ask that question and then rid yourself of what stands in the way and you will find joy and peace. Ignore it and find that that bit of emptiness is still there.

May you take stock of your lives and put away whatever it is that would stand between you and your Savior. Don't rely on following the rules, follow your heart.