

Letting Go
Mark 10:17-31

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From time to time, as a pastor, I'll hear something like this:

"I've been going to church my entire life. I was baptized and confirmed in a wonderful congregation. I may have slipped a little during college and the early years of my career, but I eventually came back. I come to worship as often as I can. I serve on committees and I've even been elected as an officer of the church. I do service projects and I've been on mission trips. I participate in Bible studies and I read daily devotions. I've done everything at church I can think of...but something is still missing. I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

Maybe you can identify with that. Perhaps your church resume isn't quite as full, but you've been involved and just haven't found the kind of fulfillment you thought you would. Or, maybe you've been gone from the church community for some time and you found life without church to be less meaningful. Perhaps you are here this afternoon looking for a connection that you've lost, or one you've never had.

That's how I typically imagine the man from this story in the Gospel of Mark. He's done everything his religious teachers have told him to do. He's followed the law. He's kept the traditions. He's worshiped. He's prayed. He's made sacrifices. He's helped those in need. He's been a good person.

But something is missing. Something is not there like he thought it would be.

So he hears about a new rabbi that is traveling throughout the land, teaching something different. People say that he also does signs and wonders, things he had only heard about in old

stories. He hears that this rabbi will be passing through on his way to Jerusalem, so he makes sure that he finds him.

I wonder if this man is bold and full of confidence when he approaches Jesus. We eventually find out that he is a man of means, so it may in fact be the case that he carries himself with the kind of self assurance that comes with success. Or, it could be that he approaches Jesus sheepishly. It may be that he is embarrassed that neither his wealth nor his piety have left him feeling the way he thought he should. Or, perhaps he comes to Jesus with sincere humility and deference. He realizes that he is missing something and he thinks that this itinerant rabbi from Nazareth just might have some answers.

Yet seeking out Jesus was not the most difficult aspect of this man's journey, nor would it require his greatest leap of faith. I don't know if anything he might have heard about Jesus could have prepared him for the response that Jesus ultimately gives.



Before we continue on to consider this radical response, I want to pause for a moment to think about the question this man is asking. So far I've framed it in terms of a feeling that something is missing from his life. But what he actually asks is this: "what must I do to obtain eternal life."

Eternal life. This story is the first and only time in the Gospel of Mark that the phrase "eternal life" is used. Mark doesn't explain it—like he explains other things his non-Jewish audience wouldn't understand—so he must assume that people were familiar enough with what eternal life means. It's a shame that he didn't spell things out a little more, because I'm still not sure we have a clear vision of eternal life today.

The basic, traditional Christian understanding of what happens after we die is clear enough. If you have faith in Jesus—whatever that might mean—you will go to heaven and forever be in the presence of God; if you don't, you will go to hell and suffer eternal punishment. But for many of us, this black and white understanding insufficiently accounts for the complexities of life.

For example, if someone lived their entire life without even having the chance to believe or reject the traditional doctrines about Jesus, how is it fair for that person to spend eternity in the flames of hell?

Or, how do we reconcile the notions of God's justice and grace in a way that makes any kind of sense? If God is truly loving, how can God allow anyone to end up in hell? If God is truly just, why should any of us escape what we deserve? Is a merciful God so capricious that we have nothing certain to hold on to?

What about our own stream of Reformed theology? According to our traditional way of thinking, our eternal destination has nothing to do with our decision or indecision—we are incapable of ever attaining our own salvation, which God has already mapped out for us. In his commentary on Mark, the late Reformed theologian Bill Placher notes of the man in this story, "Those who believe we humans are all sunk in sin and can be saved by grace alone regard his claims to have kept all the commandments since his youth with considerable suspicion."¹ But do we really want to go through all the mental gymnastics necessary to wrap our minds around the doctrine of double predestination?

¹ William C. Placer, *Mark (Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible)*; Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 144.

For that matter, I really wonder how helpful it is to talk about the afterlife at all. The New Testament understanding of salvation presupposes a variety of things that may not make as much sense for us as it did for people in the first century, or in the centuries that followed. For example, the notion that our relationship with God involves a final judgment may say as much or more about the culture that produced the Bible than the eternal reality of God. This penal understanding of God's wrath and what it takes to overcome it may have been a metaphor that made a lot of sense to Jesus' contemporaries, but I'm not sure it makes as much sense to us today. When I think about God, I don't typically begin with God's wrath—I begin with God's love. Maybe God is less concerned with dividing up the good and the bad, the saved and the damned, and more concerned with loving and redeeming us all.

This week, a pastor named Rob Bell is releasing a book called *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. Even though this book has not been released—which means that most people have not even read it yet—it has created quite a controversy in the Christian world. Bell is an influential pastor of a mega church in Grand Rapids called Mars Hill Bible Church. Influential pastors of various conservative churches have launched a pre-emptive strike against Bell, claiming that his book teaches universalism, the notion that there is no hell and that everyone ultimately goes to heaven. Bell has already been called a heretic and has been dismissed by these prominent leaders.

But what does it say about one's faith that the idea that no one goes to hell is considered problematic, even heretical? Is Christianity really so dependent on hell that it is meaningless without it?

For the most part, I find that these kinds of theological debates about what happens after we die are red herrings that distract us from what Jesus was really most concerned about. Maybe it is no wonder that “eternal life” only comes up once in Mark’s gospel, and even then it was not initiated by Jesus. Perhaps it says something that in our oldest gospel, Jesus doesn’t seem that concerned about what happens after life is over. In fact, later in the gospel he says that God “isn’t the God of the dead but of the living.”² Even here, in the story of the rich man, Jesus talks more about entering *God’s kingdom* than securing a ticket to heaven. And if you remember back to the very beginning of the gospel, God’s kingdom is about the here and now. Jesus begins his ministry with these provocative words: “Now is the time! Here comes God’s kingdom! Change your hearts and lives, and trust this good news!”³



This brings us back to our story. A rich and pious man asks Jesus what he still lacks en route to the kingdom of God. And Jesus responds, “You are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.”

This was not the wisdom the man was looking for. This was not the secret he had hoped to find in this mysterious rabbi. Instead of providing answers, Jesus asked him to let go of the one thing he simply could not give up. Dejected, the man turns around and walks away.

For me, this is one of the most haunting passages of scripture in the entire Bible. I see way too much of my own self in this man. How many times have I been on the brink of a spiritual breakthrough, only to back away at the most critical moment? How many times have I

² Mark 12:27.

³ Mark 1:15.

heard God's voice speaking so clearly to me, yet I too refuse to listen? How often do I hear God's call and walk away defiantly?

I know that I am not the only one to be troubled by this challenging text. The history of the interpretation of this passage can basically be summed up as a centuries-long endeavor to say that Jesus didn't *really* mean what he says. Surely Jesus isn't actually suggesting that in order to enter God's kingdom we must sell everything and give it away to the poor. When he was questioned about this—twice!—by his disciples, surely Jesus didn't really mean that rich people can't enter God's kingdom. Surely this extreme demand was only directed toward this one individual. Surely this is only a metaphor for letting go of the things that prevent us from following Jesus, whatever they may be—but probably not money.

I want to suggest that an authentic reading of this story requires both.

On the one hand, this is a story about letting go of whatever it is that stands between us and a deeper relationship with God. Here at the beginning of Lent, we are mindful of the traditional discipline of "giving something up". When this is done superficially, it is nothing more than an empty ritual that has more to do with tradition than transformation. But when it is done with sincerity and intentionality, Lenten disciplines of fasting or abstaining from pleasures reminds us that we are idolatrous people who regularly make a wide variety of things more important than loving God and loving others. So in a sense, it is perfectly legitimate to read this story as a broader lesson in letting go.

But we do Mark's story of Jesus a disservice if we too quickly dismiss the plain meaning of this troubling scene. Maybe Jesus really is this radical. Maybe Jesus really is suggesting that the path to God's kingdom involves stripping ourselves of every bit of pride, power, and

prestige that accompanies wealth. Maybe Jesus really is envisioning the radically new community that would develop if the rich were to redistribute their wealth to the poor. After all, it seems that this is in fact the kind of community his disciples develop after his death.

If we think seriously about this radical reading of Jesus' message, we quickly conclude that the church has failed to heed our master's teaching for the past two thousand years. Perhaps it was easier to follow when the church was mostly poor people on the margins of society. But it didn't take long, relatively speaking, for the church to become the dominant religion of imperial powers. It didn't take long for this radical new community to become an imperial power itself, what we usually refer to as Christendom. Once we had the pride, power, and prestige of wealth, we were not quick to give it up.

And so I wonder, two thousand years later, if this very failure has been the greatest impediment to the emergence of God's kingdom as Jesus envisioned it. Is this the reason we are still waiting for things to be as he said they would? Is this the reason that God's children still suffer hunger, homelessness, poverty, and oppression? Have we failed to be as radical as Jesus calls us to be? Like the rich man of today's story, have we heard Jesus' call only to turn and walk away?



Friends, as we ponder this challenging story at the beginning of our Lenten journey, what are you looking for? What do you lack? What is missing from your life? What seems missing in the world around us?

What stands in your way? What do you need to let go?