

“The Heart of the Gospel”

Mark 10:17-31

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This is a tough passage, and I wrestled with it every day last week. It contains one of the most demanding challenges found in the gospels, along with one of the harshest warnings and most outlandish promises.

When the rich, young ruler asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life, Jesus told him to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and follow him.

When this young man rejected Jesus' counsel and invitation, Jesus told his disciples it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

When Peter reminded Jesus the disciples left everything to follow him, as if he had forgotten, he told Peter their blessings would far outnumber their sacrifices.

Why did Mark include these three conversations in his account of Jesus' life? What message was he sending to his readers?

For me, it is this. **Giving, sharing and making sacrifices are the heart of the gospel.** At all times, we must be aware of our neighbors' needs, and respond by doing what Jesus would do in that situation by sharing what we have to help meet those needs. Before I elaborate, let me give you some more details about this text.

As I mentioned earlier, this passage is a compilation of three separate conversations. One is between Jesus and the young ruler, another is between Jesus and his disciples, and the third is between Jesus and Simon Peter.

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem from Galilee when a man ran to Jesus, fell on his knees and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Matthew and Luke fill in more details about the man when they describe him as a young, wealthy ruler. From all three writers, we pick up on this man's sense of desperation and urgency.

After deflecting the compliment, Jesus turned this man's attention to the commandments: "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, and honor your father and mother."

This young ruler assured Jesus he had kept everyone of these commandments since childhood, no doubt expecting a compliment from Jesus. He did not get it, though. Instead, Jesus issued him a great challenge.

"One thing you lack," Jesus said to him, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me." Evidently, this was too steep a challenge and high a price to pay, so he walked away with great sorrow.

Jesus then turned his attention to his disciples to teach them about the dangers and risks associated with prosperity, which completely baffled them. They had been taught wealth was an indicator of someone's relationship with God. Wealth was a reward for good behavior, or so they thought. Therefore, the more a person accumulated, the closer to God he or she must be.

Jesus refuted this and said that wealth, improperly used, could actually distance someone from God and lead to great danger. This led to a dialogue with Peter about God's awareness of the sacrifices he and the other disciples were making to follow Jesus on this journey of faith and goodwill. Jesus assured Peter the sacrifices the disciples made on his behalf would result in blessings beyond their wildest imagination.

Once again, why did Mark include this story in his narrative? What message was he sending his readers? **Giving, sharing and making sacrifices are the heart of the gospel.**

They are not just at the center of the gospel; they are also the core of our faith. What was the first command God gave Abraham, the father of our faith? He told Abraham to leave home with his family and join him on a journey of faith.

This was no easy task for Abraham. He was seventy-five years old, a man of great prominence and wealth who owned property and animals. Leaving home required great sacrifices, along with a lot of faith, but Abraham did it, and because he did, we have this beautiful story of God's involvement in this world and the lives of all people.

No one modeled this better than Jesus, which Paul pointed out in his epistle to the believers in Philippi.

"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man, humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross!" Philippians 2:5-8

So, we should not be surprised that Jesus called the disciples to leave home and follow him, and challenged the rich, young ruler to do the same. Giving, sharing and making sacrifices are at the core of our faith.

What is God asking you to give away? What sacrifices is he challenging you to make? Where is he asking you to go?

Like the rich, young ruler, are you struggling to be obedient? How many times have you gone to the edge and walked away?

Why is it so hard at times to be unselfish and generous? Why is it hard to let go of things and share what we have?

Is it that we are controlled by fear or greed? Do we think we'll run out of what we need, or do we see the accumulation of cash or possessions as security? Have we replaced the God who created and lovingly sustains us with dollar bills, cars and clothes?

"You lack one thing," Jesus told the rich, young ruler who must have been a model citizen. What was that? Evidently, it was generosity. There were many things he would not do—lie, cheat, steal, murder and take another man's wife.

Jesus added another one to the list, though. The young ruler would not share, at least not to the degree he could, and Jesus called him out on it. His attachment to things made it impossible for him to follow Jesus.

Why do you think giving, sharing and making sacrifices are important parts of our faith, if not the most important? Why did Jesus demand his disciples be so generous?

Giving brings the best out in us. Greed and fear can turn us ugly, angry, cynical, suspicious, jealous, vindictive and inward. Generosity does just the opposite.

It makes us humble, patient, tolerant, grateful and compassionate. It fills our hearts with love and enables us to open our lives and homes to those around us. It helps us to count our blessings and encourage those who are discouraged. It prevents us from holding grudges and seeking revenge by enabling us to forgive as we have been forgiven. According to Jesus, giving brings us true joy and happiness, the kind we can never experience by being self absorbed.

Giving also brings the best out in others. Grateful people who have been touched by your generosity will be there when you need them.

When the disciples reminded Jesus they left everything to follow him, Jesus cut them off and 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, 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" Mark 10:29-30.

One hundredfold. That's a pretty big return on an investment. What did Jesus mean by this?

When you open your life to others and share your time, talents and resources, more people than you can count will open their hearts, homes and lives to you. You will never lack for anything, or walk through any dark valley by yourself. Instead, you will be surrounded by grateful people who are as eager to help you as you helped them!

Remember the final scene in Frank Capra's Christmas movie, "It's a Wonderful Life," starring Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey and Donna Reed as his wife, Mary? The Bedford Falls townsfolk show up at George's house to give him money after finding out the Bailey Savings and Loan was in financial trouble. One by one, they put their money in the basket with a smile on their face while telling about a time George helped them when they needed it most.

Generous people will never lack for friends, especially in a crisis. Grateful neighbors, inspired by God, will rush to their aid.

In addition, giving helps us to build community, which is so important to God. Not everyone we need to reach out to has crossed our paths before, or helped us at a critical time in our lives. It is our duty as followers of Jesus, however, to come to their aid and help them carry their burden. We become our brother's keeper when we are this hospitable and helpful, which provides all people a sense of peace and security.

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than the Feeding of the 5000 recorded in John's gospel. Feeding the people that day was not the result of one person's deeds, but many. A little boy offered his lunch, Andrew brought it to Jesus, the disciples helped the people to sit in groups of fifty, and they gathered up the leftovers so they would not go to waste. It is easy to see this was a collaborative effort.

The teamwork may not have stopped there, though. According to some scholars, everyone present that day may have collaborated to make this miracle happen.

Instead of Jesus miraculously multiplying the fish and loaves, is it possible Jesus used the little boy's generosity to inspire others to do the same. After all, in that culture no one left home without food if he or she was going to be gone for any length of time.

Granted, people were gone longer that day than expected because they had to travel a great distance around the lake to find Jesus, and the hour was late, but many of them, like this

little boy, probably had some food left. Could it be that Jesus encouraged the people to sit in small groups and place before them the food they had left? Sounds reasonable to me.

Could it also be reasonable there was actually enough food for all of them, with plenty leftover? Sure.

I know this interpretation is not as glamorous as having Jesus mass produce thousands of meals, but I think it does have merit. If this is what happened that afternoon, it could have been Jesus' most profound and unforgettable lesson of the day. What would that be? **If we share with our neighbors like we did today, no one will ever go hungry!**

It could also have been used to teach the disciples and everyone how big problems are solved, by pooling resources and working with others. When people work with God and others, all things are possible! All things! No personal or global problem is too intimidating or daunting to be solved.

Giving builds healthy, safe, peaceful and prosperous communities. It always has and always will.

Who is your role model for generosity? Who taught you how to open your heart, home, pocketbook and life to those around you? Who inspired you to be your brother's keeper?

Who needs you to model this now? Who is looking to you to understand what it means to be a generous family member, friend and neighbor?

All of us have so much to give. We have been blessed to be a blessing. Won't you begin doing this today?

"You lack one thing," Jesus told the rich, young ruler. When Jesus revealed it and challenged him to do something about it, he turned and walked away. **What will you do?**