

LOOKED AT WITH LOVE

“Why?” That would have been my immediate response to Jesus if I were the rich man in the Gospel story we read this morning. “Why, Jesus? Why must I sell everything I have and give it all to the poor in order to follow you? “It’s not really necessary, is it? You don’t actually mean it, right? Surely it’s possible for me to keep and enjoy the many possessions I own—which, by the way, I earned by the sweat of my brow and rightfully belong to me—while still being able to do a bang-up job following you.

“Material wealth and faithfulness aren’t mutually exclusive, Jesus. And nowhere in the Bible does it say it’s a sin to own a lot of things. King David was wealthy. And so was King Solomon. So why? Why would you demand from me something I really don’t want to give up? “Can’t we compromise, Jesus?” “What if I gave away a portion of my wealth? Say one quarter of it. Okay, okay, I’ll make it a third.

“You drive a terribly hard bargain, Jesus. You’re asking way too much of me. So much so, in fact, that I don’t think I can follow you. Because it’s not fair. I spent most of my life accumulating the possessions I own. I enjoy everything I have. And you expect me to just up and give them all away? Hand them over to the poor? It would be more palatable if you just told me to haul everything I own to the dump and burn them. The poor don’t deserve the nice things I have. They haven’t earned them. Let the poor earn their own money.”

The scary thing is, I can imagine myself actually saying such things to Jesus. It’s easy for me to convince myself that Jesus was being totally unreasonable to the rich guy in our Gospel story; that this time Jesus was going too far; that in this case, his expectations were way too unrealistic to even consider.

You know, I’ve heard many good, sincere, God-loving Christians talk about their belief in biblical values and principles, and say how they believe what the Bible says is absolutely, unequivocally true and can’t be argued with; but not one of them that I know of has ever mentioned this particular command of Jesus and said they believed it’s absolutely, unequivocally true

I saw a bumper sticker once that declared, “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” Well, okay then. Can I watch while you “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow [Jesus]”? Biblical literalists, beware.

Now, before we all go home in despair because we know that we’ll never be able to obey this particular command of Jesus, there are a couple of things to consider about his challenging words. First of all, it’s clear that Jesus was addressing the rich man directly. It was sort of a one-time invitation to him; in effect, Jesus was offering him a spot on his team, a chance to become the thirteenth disciple.

It was the same kind of invitation Peter and Andrew and James and John received when they were out fishing and Jesus called them to give up everything they had to go follow him. The only difference was, Peter and Andrew and James and John accepted Jesus’ invitation and sacrificed everything to follow Jesus. Their wealth and possessions were tied up in their fishing business, and they walked away from it all to follow Christ.

The rich man received the same kind of invitation from Jesus to join his exclusive discipleship club; but in the end, when the opportunity to become a disciple of Jesus knocked, the rich man walked away from it. By the way, he was the only person written about in the Gospels to reject Jesus’ call to follow.

This story holds up a very important question—maybe the question—that all Christians must ultimately wrestle with. And that question is, “If need be, and if we’re called by Christ to do so, are we willing to give up the things in this world that are most important to us, to become a disciple of Jesus?” Because, you see, Jesus demands that we put him first, ahead of anything and everything else on earth, if we’re to follow him. Our Lord said that repeatedly, in various, different ways.

“Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake and the gospel will find it.”

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus made it very, very clear to those who wanted to follow him that he comes first. Always. Every time. Ahead of anything and everything else in life.

Those words of Jesus are tough, demanding, and almost impossibly difficult to swallow. And, indeed, most people’s reactions to them are similar to that of the rich man in Mark’s Gospel. They walk away sad and discouraged, and perhaps a little annoyed. Sorry, Jesus. I’d love to follow you, really I would, but I just can’t. Because you’re asking way too much from me. Maybe, if and

when you relax the terms of agreement for being a Christian, I'll be back.

For what it's worth, at least Jesus acknowledged the difficulty of doing what he demanded. He knew perfectly well that what he expected of his followers—absolute devotion and dedication—was more than most people could accept. Because the lure of worldly, material possessions is so powerful.

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” Jesus declared.

His disciples were blown away by those words. Why? Because back in Jesus' day it was believed that wealth and possessions were signs of God's favor. If you were rich, it meant you were in good with God, that you were doing things right and God was rewarding you for your efforts. Now, here was Jesus saying, “Children, how hard it is [for the rich] to enter the kingdom of God!”

That's because no one can serve both God and money. If we're busy “working for the legal tender,” as songwriter Jackson Browne once wrote, then we're not working for God. Our time, energy and devotion are focused on worldly things, not heavenly things. And, as much as we'd like and as hard as we try, we simply can't do both. So, we're called to make a choice. Jesus requires that we choose between our love for material wealth and possessions, and our devotion to him.

“Seek first God's Kingdom and God's righteousness,” Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount, “and the things you need in this life will be given to you by God.” Put God first, and God will make sure we're taken care of. But it's so difficult to put God's Kingdom first, because worldly possessions tend to possess us. We don't really own them; they own us.

You know, there's a good and appropriate reason that we're called “consumers”: not so much because we consume material things, but because we can be consumed by material things. They can, and often do, become our highest priority in life. The one who dies with the most toys wins!

“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

Most people aren't rich in the sense of being millionaires and billionaires, but that doesn't mean worldly possessions—in whatever quantity—can't get in the way of one's devotion and obedience to Christ. Because they can get in the way. And, for many people who desire to follow Jesus, worldly possessions do get in the way. Which makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to enter God's Kingdom.

Jesus' solution to this desire for material wealth was to get rid of whatever things come between us and Christ. Just discard them. Recycle them. Help out the less fortunate with them. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Be honest. When you hear those words of Jesus, doesn't it make you

shudder? Don't you feel a sense of dread and fear? Or irritation and anger? And a whole lot of resistance? I know it can and does cause me to feel that way.

Yes, I think Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Because, for the rich and comfortable; for those who are possessed by their possessions, entering the Kingdom just isn't their highest priority. And if it's not a priority, there's a good chance it may never come to pass.

So, where do we go from here? If it's so incredibly difficult for those of us who love our money and worldly possessions to get into God's Kingdom; if a camel has a better chance of threading its way through the eye of a needle than we have threading our way through the Pearly Gates, what hope is there for us?

Or, in the words of Jesus' disciples, "Who then can be saved?" Can you? Can I? Can anybody find salvation?

Well, yes. But not through our own power. Not by anything we can do or say. Not by our own merit and worth. As Jesus said: "With human beings this is impossible, but not with God; because all things are possible with God."

What uplifting words those are. "All things are possible with God." In other words, with God there's always an opportunity. There's always potential because God can perform miracles—miracles like mercy and grace.

Which means there's hope, and it's possible, that even the rich man who came up to Jesus, and whose money and possessions were the most important things in his life, had a change of heart. No, we don't know if that actually happened because the Gospels never mention him again. But why should we think the worst and give up hope for him? Because "with God all things are possible."

So, instead of assuming that the rich man was doomed from the moment he rejected Jesus' offer to follow him, let's assume the best and keep in mind the divine grace that surrounded him even as he walked away from Jesus. Let's remember that, even if we abandoned the rich man in our minds, the rich man was never abandoned by Jesus. We know this because Mark's Gospel says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him."

And, even though the rich man rejected the chance to follow Jesus on that particular occasion, the love Jesus had for him still remained, and the offer of Eternal Life was still available to him. And it would continue to be available to him, right up until the very last moment. The opportunity to inherit eternal life was available if he changed. If he had a change of heart. If he changed his life's priorities.

Would that be difficult for the rich man?

Absolutely. It would be extremely difficult. But not impossible. Because with God, all things are possible. And therein lies the hope, and the divine promise, for the rich man and for all of us, as well. That with God it is possible for us to change, and love the Lord more than material wealth.

Yes, we can change, if we want to. If we want it to happen, God can transform our old, worldly values into new and higher ones so that we can follow Jesus more faithfully. That's not an impossible thing to have happen to us. If we desire it. If we pray for it. If we ask God for it. Because, you see, the rich man isn't the only one Jesus looked at with love.

Jesus looks down at us with love, too.

By the grace of God, may we never turn and walk away from him. Amen.