

ONE THING WE LACK

Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Psalm 22:1-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The story of the rich, young ruler. Most of us have heard it. It's in three of the four gospels. Mark tells us the man was rich. Matthew says he was young. Luke says he was a ruler. So we know him as the "rich, young ruler." And by chance the story falls on Stewardship Sunday when I'm going to ask you to tithe. But I find the story deeply troubling. Let's take a closer look at the story of the rich, young ruler.

"As (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" He's the kind of man we'd love to have as a church member. He's eager. He's courteous. He's reverent toward Jesus. And he's concerned about his spiritual welfare. We learn also that he's highly moral and has great wealth. Mark tells us that "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." So what does Jesus say to this rich, young man whom he loves? He says, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

I wouldn't have said that. I'd have said, "God loves you just as you are. You can't earn your salvation by keeping the commandments. Simply trust Jesus. Salvation is by grace, through faith in Christ. You do need to worship regularly. Get involved in a small group. And here's a pledge card. I encourage you to tithe, but give whatever you want." The last thing I'd say is, "Go, sell, and give to the poor." That's a sure way of losing the guy. Why not invite him to follow "when you can get away from your other responsibilities, and bring your check book along?" Why lay such a burden on a man who is obviously spiritually hungry? *especially if you love him*

Mark tells us the rich young ruler "was shocked." I guess so. And he went away "grieving." Now, if I say something that grieves a person, ^{I love} I grieve also. I regret saying things that grieve people – I wish I could take back what I said. Jesus didn't seem to have that problem. Jesus loved the rich young ruler unconditionally and yet he said what grieved him. What kind of love is it that's willing to say what grieves a person you love? I don't understand Christ's love for the rich, young ruler. I can't explain it. Why couldn't Jesus have relaxed the conditions a little so as not to lose this young man? Jesus dearly loved him yet he didn't make it easy for the man to become his follower. I'd have run down the road after the rich, young ruler yelling, "Wait! Don't go!

Maybe you're not ready to give away everything yet. Just do what you can." But maybe precisely *because* Jesus loves us, he tells us things that grieve us. The church and preachers say sweet things to help us comfortably adjust to the world's values. Jesus says things to people he loves that grieve them and make them feel uncomfortable because he wants them to adjust their lives to the values of the kingdom of God. The church settles too often with making our lives comfortable, whereas Jesus wants us and the world to be redeemed.

The story of the rich, young ruler troubles me. Does it trouble you? I know it's tempting to explain away. Jesus was simply testing the young man. He knew wealth was an idol this particular man needed to give up. He wanted the man to realize that none of us has kept all the commandments. He wanted him to know that salvation is by grace through faith. He was just testing him. Or, the command to give up everything is only for monks and nuns who want to attain to a higher level of Christian commitment. I wish I could explain away the words of Jesus. But when I try I'm left feeling like I've watered down what Jesus is saying. No matter how much water I add, it's still hard to swallow.

The disciples were perplexed by what Jesus said. Shouldn't we be perplexed? Is it really possible to do what Jesus says? As a Presbyterian minister I emphasize God's grace. By God's grace, we can do the impossible. By God's grace even the wealthy may be saved. C. S. Lewis once said, "All things are possible. It's even possible to get a very large camel through the eye of a very small needle. That's possible. But it's extremely hard on the camel." God's grace makes it possible for people he loves to do the impossible and unexpected.

When I was a pastor in Reedsville, Pa I gave a sermon on the rich, young ruler. I was young and foolish and told the fairly wealthy congregation to go, sell all their possessions, give to the poor and follow Jesus. Fat chance that would happen. But the Reedsville congregation, like you, was wonderful. Very forbearing. They smiled. They complimented me. They said, "I like the way you preach the Bible." But they didn't go sell all their possession and give to the poor. I guess they were waiting for me to lead the way.

A few days after that sermon a rich, young ruler came to my study - the son of a wealthy farmer whose family had lived in the valley for over two hundred years. He was handsome. He was polite. He was devout.

He was moral. He was wealthy. He just graduated from college with a degree in finance. Recently married to a dedicated Christian woman. He came to me and said, "I've been thinking about your sermon." Great! I thought. He's going to increase his pledge. Maybe I can get him to take over the youth group. But I was disappointed but what he said. He said, "My wife and I are really concerned about the poor. We have an opportunity to go to Guatemala and minister in a small Indian village. We think we can make a difference. We're not asking for any money. We're going to cash in our mutual funds and use our savings. Dad and mom aren't real happy. 'Whose going to take care of the farm?' But this is something we really want to do." My heart sank. There goes a really good pledge. His uncle came to me later, mad as a hatter. "You've got to talk some sense into him. He's throwing his entire life away." And I said, "Yeah! I really didn't expect anybody to take my preaching seriously."

Well, time to bring this sermon to a conclusion. I wish I knew what happened to the rich, young ruler. Maybe he went away and lost everything in a stock market crash? Did he ever find eternal life? We don't know. We do know that at some point in his life he had to let go of everything. We all do. We can't take it with us.

A second thing we know - just as Jesus looked on that rich young man and loved him - so he looks on us with love. Jesus Christ sees you and me and loves us - inexplicably and unconditionally. I don't believe Jesus ever stopped loving the rich, young man. I don't believe Jesus ever stops loving us... and precisely because he loves us he'll never stop telling things that grieve us when we try to live comfortably with the world's values. Because he loves us, he doesn't want us to adjust comfortably to the world. He wants makes us disciples who long to be conformed to the values of the kingdom of God.

For a third and final thing. After the story of the rich, young ruler how can I ask you to pledge a portion of your income - why not give all and follow Christ? Jesus doesn't want to be a part of our life - something to round off the life of someone who has everything else. God has come to us in Jesus Christ so that we might have life - eternal life - He wants to be the organizing principle around which our lives our lived and built - not our wealth and possessions.