

Julie Merritt Lee  
October 11, 2009

Providence Baptist Church  
Hendersonville, North Carolina

## ***“Inheriting Eternal Life”***

Mark 10: 17-31

What comes to mind when you hear the words “my precious” (with appropriate inflection)? Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*? If you have seen the last installment of the trilogy “Return of the King,” you will remember the powerful opening scene when Smeagol (as it was his name at that time) and his friend were on a boat fishing. Smeagol looked so normal, well, except for pointed ears. Smeagol’s friend finds “the ring,” an evil forged ring that has a power all its own. And Smeagol sees it, senses its power and has to have it for himself. In fact, he’s so seduced by the ring, that he strangles his friend to death to take the ring. Sadly however, the power in the ring only leads him to a sad and lonely existence—truly his possession has possessed him. The ring has granted him eternal life but it is really a living death. As he ages his appearance becomes more gruesome and ghoulish. He now has no control over his own life, and he has no relationships except with his counterself and of course his “my precious.”

Possessed by his own possession. A rich man comes to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Eventually (to cut to the chase), Jesus looks at him with love and tells him he lacks one thing, he must sell everything he has and give it to the poor and come follow him. But the man is deflated, face downturned, realizing that’s a sacrifice too difficult for him to make because he was a rich man. “Why did he have to ask that *one* thing? Because that’s the one thing Jesus knew he wasn’t willing to give up.

Interesting, because the man had come in search of a type of riches. He wanted to know how to inherit eternal life. He wanted the good stuff, life without end, and he wanted to make sure he was measuring up—that he would make the cut. Isn’t that how we were all trained to think and act—do what’s right, be that good little girl or boy, so we will get the treat, the ice cream cone, our parent’s approval? And, now somehow it’s translated on a spiritual level—what must I do to get the good “spiritual stuff?”

I have a friend this week who emailed me awakening in the middle of the night with tremors, night sweats, heart racing—panicked about whether or not she’s going to hell. She’s been a Christian her whole life, but now she’s called into question some beliefs about God, and so she’s afraid in a sense that the eternal life she will inherit will be just as painful as her present life. Fear has just stricken her. Have I done enough good? Am I acceptable in God’s eyes, but beyond just acceptance—will I get the goods in the life to come?

So, here’s the rich man wanting the good stuff. And Jesus tells him finally—if you want the best stuff, join my circle of disciples—sell your stuff and follow me. And let me tell you, I don’t think he was using hyperbole/exaggeration to get his point across. I think he was inviting this man to be his disciple. And disciple/missionaries didn’t possess but the most basic of clothing. Remember when he called the twelve to send them out two by two—he said take nothing with you except a staff, and sandals. Don’t bring bread,

tunics, a bag or money for their belts. So Jesus invites this man to join his group of disciples. He is saying, “If you want to know the kingdom, if you want to know eternal life—its’ happening right now.” For Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, soon to be crucified and rise again. Jesus was inviting him to join in relationship with him in the most earnest sense. And the man, couldn’t handle it—too radical. It would upset his creature comforts, and his status and power that wealth affords.

Do you remember the joke about an evangelist who preached a long sermon and then came to the altar call saying, “Come to the altar and give your life to Christ!” Nobody came.

In frustration, the evangelist said, “Come to the altar, as a way of saying that you love and honor God.” Still nobody came.

In even greater frustration, the evangelist appealed to the congregation, “Come to the altar as a way of saying that you want to live a better life.” Nobody came.

Finally, “Look, if you love your mother, come down to the altar. Okay?”<sup>1</sup>

See, we pastor types have tried to water down the gospel, to try to make it more attractive. But I don’t see Jesus doing that here, his. The man was concerned about his future inheritance, and Jesus responds with an answer about the here and now.

Ah, herein lies the problem. Eternal life is not just a future place or experience. It “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. **This is the true God and eternal life.**” (1 John 5:20). You see, eternal life is what we experience when we are in relationship with Christ, the One who is Life. And that begins the moment we are in relationship with him.

Another way Jesus could have asked this is—“Who do you love? What is the source of your life?” Isn’t that what Jesus is getting at? Are you loving God and what God loves, for this is the source of eternal life. Jesus went for the jugular. He knew what was holding this man back from true discipleship—his attachment to his wealth. Perhaps if he had met a poor man that day who asked the same question, he would have tailor made the response, getting to the question, “What are you holding onto, that keep you from following me?” Is it ego, position, anxiety, fear, anger....? Jesus is calling this man and us on the carpet—Who do you love—release everything that has power over you—that which possesses you, and then you will discover eternal life.

And this is where our good old friend went wrong. His desire for eternal life had nothing to do with relationship. He wanted to make sure he was stamped with approval, that he had done what was necessary in this life, to experience the goods of the next. Somehow though, just keeping the Biblical commands left Jesus out of the picture.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Peril (and the Promise) of Being Met by Jesus." Bishop William H. Willimon, *Day 1 Radio*, October 11, 2009.

This man was missing something long before his wealth was demanded of. He needed Christ. It's only in relationship with Christ that we are given the power to give freely, for the Holy Spirit empowers us. For how can you give generously if you are poor in spirit? For Jesus says to the disciples when they say it's impossible to be saved, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

There is a TV show on A & E that some of you may watch called "Hoarders." It's psychologically fascinating to be sure, but one episode in particular captures the essence of this attachment to stuff over relationship. A woman, probably in her sixties is shown to have amassed more stuff than you can imagine—there were empty chip bags, receipts, things you would call trash, but she would call treasure. Her daughter comes and tries to talk sense into her. At one point she says to her mother, "For once mom, I just want to matter more than your garbage." And you know what the mom said, "You aren't here all the time, but my stuff is." And the daughter replies, "Fine. I'm done. You have made your choice, and you have chosen your stuff." And she replies, "I've been fine before you; I'll be fine after you."

Now this may sound extreme, to be that attached to our own stuff over relationships with our family, but is it really that far off? How many times have I heard about families fighting over inheritance of a different kind? Think about the stuff that gets in your way of relating to Jesus, of relating to the poor.

A group of 14 students from Truett seminary (including myself) were on a trip to India, but we had stopped over in Hong Kong for a few days to get our "sealegs" before traveling on. The entire trip was six weeks long, and we had all packed as reasonable as we could in large backpacks. However, I remember after one long day of walking through Hong Kong, backpacks in tow, my friend Stephanie told me how much her back was hurting. The pack was getting really heavy. Everybody was complaining, and then finally Stephanie said some of the most profound words that have always stayed with me, "I'm burdened down by my own stuff."

If Jesus came to you and said the very same thing, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, then come and follow me." Think about it, I think we would begin processing it this way, "What can I live without? Gosh, I have three black pairs of shoes, perhaps I could live with one..." But this is the wrong way to go about it. Jesus is asking the rich man to give not to live without, not to be empty but to be filled—be filled with something new, namely the very thing he is asking for—eternal life. But this is the problem, when we are asked to give up, we only focus on what we are giving up, not what we are being filled with, which is more abundant.

So how do we break free from that which possesses us, whether it's wealth, anger, independence, self-criticism. Like the ring, first, we have to take it off. But what makes us do that? What really motivates us? The answer is in realizing that we are being filled more than we are giving up—there's greater freedom in Christ, than the perceived freedom that security affords. We're not really free, for example, with our possessions.

Think about it. We get some stuff, and then we have to maintain it, clean it, replace it, insure it. It's a vicious cycle, not a life-giving one. We must realize that the sacrifice Christ calls us to to "give up" comes with the reward of being "filled up" with a greater love, a greater relationship, than any possession or emotion could ever give.

But it does require a risk, a stepping out, just as it did for the other disciples that left everything to follow Jesus. They must have thought at some point, "This may be crazy, but I trust that what's in him is greater than what is in me or anything I could possess."

"What are you investing in?" Is it more stuff, more anxiety, more anger or your walk with God and neighbor. The rich man had it all wrong. You don't "inherit" eternal life as if it's another possession that is passed down from one generation to the next. You *enter* eternal life, by choosing to be a radical disciple for Christ. And remember you're not on your own. It's impossible for you to make this step, this new direction by yourself. But remember the words of Jesus, "All things are possible with God." Amen.