

Wealth and Discipleship

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October 11, 2009



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Mark 10:17-31 and Hebrews 4:12-16

When I was 19, I went on my first international mission trip to Colima, Mexico. I went with a church group and we worked with children in an orphanage for about 10 days. I remember having a great time and really being stretched. What I didn't anticipate was the reverse culture shock that I faced when I got back home. After meeting a family of 9 siblings who were in the orphanage because their family couldn't afford to care for them, my perspective changed. I began to see for the very first time just how good I had it. I had graduated from high school, was going to college, was looking forward to graduating and finding a job and getting married...the whole picture. These children had nothing. They were living in an orphanage because their family couldn't afford to take care of them... I began to feel guilty about how good I had it. I began to feel bad for the children in the orphanage. It's been a struggle for me ever since. Each time I go on a mission trip and spend time among people who are so happy with so little, I am challenged by how much I have. I'm challenged by my wealth, conflicted by it. It's a struggle that I can't get away from and don't have the answer to, so I continue to wrestle with wealth and discipleship and how they are connected.

In ancient times, and in our times as well, wealth is typically celebrated and attributed to blessing and favor with God. Wealthy people are usually the most powerful in societies, too. All through the Old Testament, the prophets warned about wealth and the pitfalls wealth could cause, especially when people assumed that wealthy people were more likely to be saved than common people. That's just simply not true. Depending on wealth can cause problems. It certainly did for the rich young ruler who comes to Jesus seeking eternal life. The man is sincere for sure. He comes to Jesus in a kneeling position and calls him "good teacher." He is looking for a simple answer, but Jesus catches him off guard by calling him to let go of his dependency on his wealth. Jesus isn't asking him to do anything that he's hasn't already been doing throughout his life. He says that he's kept the commandments since his youth. These verses are not praising poverty or attacking wealth. This man has been defined by his wealth,

Wealth and Discipleship

and it's really sad, but he just cannot accept a new definition of himself. But even still, Jesus loves him.

Jesus invites him to be a disciple and to give up what is hindering him from a life of faith – his wealth. The story invites people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. The man depended on his wealth. It gave him his identity. Giving up his wealth would have meant giving up his identity and accepting a new way of recognizing himself. And he couldn't. He just couldn't separate himself from his wealth. It owned him; it defined him. He was his wealth.

Can we accept our new identities as disciples of Christ? Can we depend on God for everything and not material possessions or wealth or status? Can we? What do we depend on for our identity?

We need to look into our lives to find out what is hindering us from following Jesus. It may indeed be our wealth. Or it could be something else like our social status or the size of our houses or the cars that we drive. Or it could be our education or our jobs or in some cases, our families. It could be any of these things, but for this young ruler, his wealth was in the way. Jesus was asking him to accept a new identity as a disciple, but the man wasn't ready. Did you notice how Jesus treated him? He loved him. And he let him walk away. He didn't chase after him or say he was sorry. He knew the man wasn't ready. That's how Jesus treats us, too. He offers us a chance to become a disciple. Some of us take him up on it on the first offer. Some of us walk away and come back later. In every case, Jesus loves us and is waiting for us when we are ready to give up everything and follow.

For the rich young ruler, giving up his wealth meant giving up power and giving up control of his life. Think for a moment about how the disciples lived. They had virtually nothing except the clothes on their backs. No extra changes of clothes or extra money. When they entered a town, they were to accept the hospitality of the first house that would have them. And that meant that they would stay at that house and eat with them and sleep there for as long as they felt called to stay in the town. It could have been weeks or months! Imagine that!

If we are not called to such a radical sacrifice as the rich young ruler, then we are always being reminded of the generous hospitality being practiced in early Christian communities. We who call ourselves Christians should think seriously about stewardship of our money and material possessions. We live in a

consumer culture that tells us we always need more and more and more. As a woman, it's tough because you always get those sale catalogs in the mail that tell you that last year's clothes are not good enough and you need this year's. It's difficult to resist that pressure, isn't it? I know I certainly struggle with it.

This story is not a blanket statement about wealth. It is not saying that every one of us has to go and sell everything we have and give money to the poor. Not everyone is called to that. But it's not a bad thing if you are! Some Christians in the past have interpreted this passage literally and have sold everything to live in a community together. The point is that our possessions and our wealth can get in the way of our discipleship and our relationship with Jesus. If we are distracted by things that the world says we should need, we aren't really focused on Jesus. Riches can distract us; they can take our focus of what is really going to make us rich – and that's Jesus. And the riches will come from the gift of eternal life. But a life with Jesus isn't always going to be smooth sailing. There will be some hard times and some persecution, but we will always have the wealth of eternal life.

What does this mean to us today? Why should we heed these words? Because the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword. It is challenging to heed the words of God and to live by them. It asks a lot of us and doesn't make life easy or comfortable. But by heeding the word of God and having a relationship with Jesus Christ, we are able to approach the throne of grace and receive eternal life. God doesn't promise us a cushy life if we believe and anyone who tells you different is misinformed. We must heed the whole of scripture and in some cases, it challenges us to the core. Through Scripture, God asks us to give up control of our lives and trust that God will take care of us, provide for us. That's difficult! Especially in a world where we are taught to rely on ourselves.

Scripture and the Christian faith are counter-cultural. The values we find in Scripture do not match the values of our society and our culture. Our culture says to amass material things and to look out for "number one." But scripture says to care for the widows and orphans and the homeless, to make sure they are provided for. Scripture says not to get attached to any of our worldly material possessions and not to put our hope in them, because hope comes from God alone. This is so difficult, isn't it? Because we live in our culture, we have the values of our culture. We like our houses and our cars. They provide us shelter and transportation. Where would we be without them? But think about the disciples. They had neither. They relied on others for shelter and food and

Wealth and Discipleship

walked everywhere they went. And they were taken care of and fed and the gospel was preached.

Think about how we struggle with our wealth and being disciples of Christ. The message about wealth and discipleship is a difficult one to swallow for us. It challenges us to the core. Dealing with our wealth in a way that glorifies God is difficult, but not impossible. As the verse says today, nothing is impossible with God. Let us be thankful for the wealth we have, but let us always make sure that we are using our wealth to glorify God.

Thanks be to God.