

“Sticker Shock”
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Mark 10:17-31

I’m going to start with a question, and I want you to call out some answers.
In our society today, what do you need to be considered a successful leader
on a large (national or global) scale?

Today Jesus would probably not be considered a good leader.

First of all, he was divisive.

He pitted people of one group against another.

He was too blunt, too direct.

He was definitely not Minnesota nice.

He gave things away he could have charged for,
and then he turned around and set high prices
on things that weren’t marketable.

He was accused of attempting to redistribute wealth and incite riots.

His critics were harsh, and his defenders were few.

He was not a good businessman, not a good politician, and not a successful leader.
But none of that stopped him.

This story is a case in point.

A rich man comes running up to Jesus.

First of all, rich people didn’t run. It was unseemly.

Wealthy people had others to do their running for them.

Then he kneels before Jesus—

again, something a wealthy person should not be doing.

Third, he calls Jesus “Good Teacher,” an honorary title.

The disciples must have been thinking, *“Hey, Jesus, good prospect!*

This guy can finance our ministry, lend some credibility to our campaign.

You wouldn’t have to multiply loaves and fish any more!

Just set the hook and reel him in.”

Instead, Jesus makes Bad Move #1:

he dismisses the honorific title and therefore the person bestowing it.

“No one is good but God,” Jesus says, as the disciples cringe.

Then Jesus makes Bad Move #2:

he starts naming the commandments that the man should already be keeping.

The disciples at this point are probably thinking,

A) Don't insult the guy by suggesting that he doesn't keep the commandments;

B) Don't name ALL the commandments. He's rich! Let him pick his top seven!

And then—wait, Jesus said “You shall not defraud?”

That's not one of the ten commandments.

Is Jesus suggesting that because the man is rich, he defrauded people?

Jesus! This is not the way you get new (rich) followers!

But the man did not seem to be offended. He merely replied,

“Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

And then Jesus made Bad Move #3:

He said, “You lack one thing;

go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor,

and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

That's it, Jesus. You just lost him.

You had a great prospect for a disciple,

and you just gave the poor guy sticker shock.

Apparently so, for we are told:

“When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

I find this phrase curious. What was he grieving?

Was he grieving the loss of eternal life?

That's what he had asked for; was it now out of reach?

Were Jesus' words so outrageous, so beyond consideration,

that he was grieving the fact that he would not gain eternal life?

Or was he grieving the loss of his possessions?

This would suggest that he was actually considering what Jesus said.

Was he grieving the loss of everything his wealth meant?

And what did his wealth mean?

Some scholars point out that in several places in the First Testament,

people thought that wealth was a blessing from God,

almost a sign of good behavior.

If you were wealthy, God was blessing you

so you must be right with God.

On the other hand, the prophets were always criticizing the people

for not sharing their wealth, for not taking care of the vulnerable.

Other scholars point out that by Jesus' time, wealth was highly suspect.

If you were wealthy, you clearly cheated someone,
or got rich at the expense of others.

There is even a question of whether this rich man would have had slaves.

Regardless of how others viewed him,

we can guess what being rich meant to the man.

Being rich was being seen in the marketplace.

Being rich was being heard in the temple.

Being rich was having the power to tell others what to do.

Being rich is having choices, for yourself and for your children.

Being rich is being able to feel good about giving charity.

Being rich is never worrying about what things cost.

But if he does what Jesus says—if he sells all his possessions and gives to the poor,
then you know what will become of him.

He will become the poor.

He will become the one in need of charity.

And he has no way of knowing what being poor even means.

Being poor is being invisible—or worse, pitied.

Being poor is people assuming you're lazy or stupid.

Being poor is hoping the toothache goes away.

Being poor is hoping you'll be invited to dinner.

Being poor is never wearing anything someone else hasn't worn first.

Being poor is choosing between the lesser of two evils without even realizing it.

Being poor is telling your kids they can be anything they want—

not because you believe it, but because if you don't,
you're afraid you'll all fall into despair.¹

Jesus told the man to give up his possessions, but with those possessions went
power and freedom and choice.

He would go from the epitome of wealth to the embodiment of poverty.

Is this really what Jesus was requiring of the rich man?

More importantly, is it what Jesus requires of us?

As I wrote and read through this list of what it means to be rich

¹ The idea and some of these items on the “Being poor” list are from John Scalzi’s blog by this title,
<http://whatever.scalzi.com/2005/09/03/being-poor/>

and what it means to be poor,
 one word kept coming to mind: privilege.
 Most of us are soaking in it.
 My wife wrote a beautiful essay about our experiences in moving here,
 and how even our problems were covered by privilege.
 I got pulled over by the police in upstate new York for having a headlight out,
 and not once did I fear for my safety.
 I am a white woman who would not be seen as a threat.
 Later that night we had a tire blowout, and although I did worry about our safety
 at 11pm on the side of the New York Thruway,
 it was not complicated by the color of my skin
 or my ability to speak the language.
 And we had the money not only for AAA but also for an extra night's hotel.
 Through minor inconveniences to major mishaps, our privilege was evident.

Is Jesus calling us to give that up?
 I'll admit I'm rather fond of being able to afford AAA,
 and I'm rather fond of not having my car searched for no reason,
 and I really like the protection that my skin provides my children,
 at least for now.
 I don't want to give that up, and I wouldn't know how to anyway.

But Jackie has been doing some genealogy research on my family,
 and she came across several of my ancestors' wills,
 in which they leave enslaved people as property.
 One of them wrote a codicil saying
 "It is my will and desire that my executors have a special and particular care taken
 of my old negro man Jack and his wife Rose, granting them liberty of choosing
 their own master and mistress of any legatees concerned in the estate."
 I'm guessing that he thought he was being kind,
 to let them choose their own masters.
 Kindness within an inhumane system is better than cruelty,
 but it does nothing to dismantle the inhumane system.

Jackie also uncovered ancestors of mine
 who were involved in the wars against Native Americans,
 one of whom was said to
 "never let an opportunity pass to kill an Indian."

These are my ancestors.
 I am ashamed that I carry their blood, however diluted it might be by now.
 What do I owe indigenous people for my ancestor's involvement

in the horrors of the past?
 What do I owe for the sins of my ancestors?
 What do I owe for my own?
 More than just my white guilt, because that doesn't help anyone.
 My hairdresser in Maine was Wabanaki,
 but I'm pretty sure my tips didn't count as reparations!

I do think there is a financial component,
 and I don't know if that's the hardest part or the easiest . . .
 and we're back to Jesus' instructions to the man to sell everything.
 I don't think that is Jesus' call to us
 (or I'm in trouble with that new mortgage!).
 But what *does* it mean for us?
 Living more simply?
 Bypassing a luxury?
 Supporting more justice organizations?
 Increasing our pledge to the church?
 Given our current challenges, I don't think we would turn it down!
 BUT is this how we, to use the man's words, "inherit eternal life"?

Depending on our theology, we either embrace that phrase or dismiss it,
 either way assuming we know what it means.
 I freely admit that I am not a Greek scholar,
 and in this congregation I am running the risk of half a dozen of you
 raising your hand and saying "I am!"
 But I'm willing to take that risk
 because my study of the Greek word translated as *eternal*
 suggests something different than what many people assume.
 It means, in part, "age-long, and therefore: practically eternal, unending;"
 but also "partaking of the character of that which lasts for an age,
 as contrasted with that which is brief and fleeting."
 It also (quote) "does not focus on the future per se, but rather on the quality
 of the age it relates to. Thus believers live in 'eternal life' right now, experiencing
 this quality of God's life now as a *present possession*."²

So maybe when this man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life,
 he means right now, what do I need as a *present possession*
 that will make me closer to God, closer to life as God intends?

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/166.htm>

Jesus' answer is basically to tell the many that he is possessing the wrong things, maybe even being owned by his possessions.

His physical possessions were keeping him from possessing love,
 peace, generosity,
 possessing communion with God and the world.

Christ is clear (both here and in other places) that we are called to
 "radical renunciation."³

Radical renunciation of what the world says is important
 Radical renunciation of the values of our society
 Radical renunciation of that which binds us
 and keeps us from following in the ways of Jesus.

What is your one thing?

What do you possess in such abundance
 that it stands in the way of life as God intends?

It might be possessions; it might be money.

But it might be arrogance, self-sufficiency, or envy.

It might be shame or fear or a stingy heart.

Remember, true discipleship sometimes comes with a little sticker shock.

But also remember this....

Right after the man said he had kept the commandments from his youth,
 the story says: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him,"

and *so* he said "Get rid of what holds you back.

Then you will be free—

free to follow me,

free to love me, as I love you.

Eternal life is now,

and eternal love is our both our blessing and our challenge.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Ibid.