

Proper 23B “And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; come, follow me.” Mark 10.21

After the death of his father and mother Anthony was left alone with one little sister: his age was about eighteen or twenty, and on him the care both of home and sister rested. Now it was not six months after the death of his parents, and going according to custom into the Lord's House, he communed with himself and reflected as he walked how the Apostles left all and followed the Savior; and how they in the Acts sold their possessions and brought and laid them at the Apostles' feet for distribution to the needy, and what and how great a hope was laid up for them in heaven. Pondering over these things he entered the church, and it happened the Gospel was being read, and he heard the Lord saying to the rich man, 'If you would be perfect, go and sell that you have and give to the poor; and come follow me and you shall have treasure in heaven.' Anthony, as though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account, went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers— they were three hundred acres , productive and very fair— that they should be no more a clog upon himself and his sister. And all the rest that was movable he sold, and having got together much money he gave it to the poor, reserving a little however for his sister's sake.

And so began St. Anthony the monk and servant of Jesus Christ. He had had a great deal of wealth by the standards of his culture. He was a young Christian man with a sensitive conscience. He heard the Gospel and he responded to it. This passage from Matthew, Mark and Luke has forged many a holy man and woman: St. Francis and his disciple, St. Clare, were others who heard Jesus' call to poverty. But we may rightly ask what is going on here in this passage and what bearing does it have on our lives in our time and in this place? Is this a universal principle that Jesus is proclaiming, or was it more specific? Must we sell all that we have if we are to be Jesus' disciples, or is there some kind of second class membership in the Church for those who want to have their possessions in this world and have some hope for the world to come? What role do our possessions play in our lives as human beings, but more importantly, in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ? For Jesus himself said, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God.”

Let us then consider the rich man and his desire. Remember that Jesus had concluded his ministry in Galilee and was marching, with his crack troops, his 12 disciples, on the capitol city of Jerusalem. By what we read in the Gospels we can tell that the disciples were pretty well convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed, but as yet uncrowned, king of Israel. He, like David his great-great-grandfather, had been secretly anointed as king, but had remained in the wilderness for years before finally being crowned and enthroned in the city of Jerusalem. Jesus' hour had finally come. He was going to Jerusalem to join battle with the enemies of God. It seems that many believed that Jesus was somehow involved with bringing in the kingdom of God.

A rich man from the crowd ran to Jesus and knelt down humbly before him. And with great obeisance addressed Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” We may hear this question and come to the conclusion that what the man was asking was something like, “What must I do now in this life to ensure that I will go to heaven when I die?” We have been trained to think about heaven when people start talking about eternal life. However, if we look through the rest of this passage we find that when Jesus talks about eternal life he is just as likely to use the phrase “Kingdom of God”. The rich man had asked Jesus what he must do to ensure that he would be a citizen of the Kingdom of God. What was the common, first century Jewish understanding of the Kingdom of God? Well, it basically referred to the Day of the Lord when the true God came down to save his people, throw out the pagan Gentiles, rebuild the Temple, and rule the world from Jerusalem. The pious Jew looked forward to that day with great anticipation. God’s righteous judgment would usher in an eternal Golden Age of peace and prosperity and joy. The righteous dead would be raised and death would be no more. This was the rich man’s hope for the Kingdom of God. He desired to participate in it when it arrived in power.

But if this was the case then Jesus’ reply seems to be rather flippant. The man had just expressed his deepest aspiration to be among the people of God and to see him when he appeared. Jesus gave him a rather short, Sunday school answer: do you now the commandments? Do them! But Jesus wasn’t being short at all. Instead, Jesus was showing that he understood the man’s question and its implication. Who would inherit the Kingdom of God? The Jews! Who were the Jews? For starters, they were of the nation of Israel, marked out from the other nations by circumcision, practicing the Torah (that Law given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai), and keeping the Sabbath. But, there were plenty of Jews that fit this base line description that the pious Jew considered “sinners”. The more rigorous, we might call them fundamentalist Jews, like the Pharisees and the Essenes who lived in the desert, believed that only members of their sect would be in God’s favor when he came in judgment. The rich man said that he had kept all the commandments from his childhood. He wanted the extra list that was over and above what everyone else had. The rich man seemed to think that Jesus was God’s agent to bring in the kingdom at any moment. He wanted Jesus to tell him what it was going to take to get in.

And Jesus looking upon him loved him. I would like to pause here for just a moment. Few people enjoy the company of unbearably cocky, bragging individuals. Their high opinion of themselves leaves little room for anyone else. It is possible that Jesus, lover of the greatest sinners, could simply love one whom no one else could love. But that doesn’t seem to be Mark’s point. It seems that Mark, and Jesus, felt real affection for a man who was truly earnest in his piety, his way of life, and his anticipation for the coming of the Lord. Jesus had called the 12 while they were busy doing other things. This man had sought out Jesus, and begged to be included among his disciples.

So Jesus gave the man the answer that he had asked of him. "Sell all that you have, give the proceeds to the poor, so that you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Jesus had already told him to keep the commandments. Was this new instruction an addition to what he had already told him? Was this a new law, or did this remedy a deficiency in the old law? Consider what Jesus had already told him. He had quoted the six commandments from the second tablet of the Law. The second tablet prescribed a man's duty to his neighbor. Don't murder; don't commit adultery; don't take what doesn't belong to you; don't use your words to tear down your neighbor's reputation; don't envy your neighbor's possessions and his successes; and don't forget to take care of your parents. But Jesus never mentioned the commandments on the first tablet of the Law. Was the rich man relieved from his duty to God? Certainly not! What is our duty to God? We must not have anything else in his place; we must not make any images of those things that might tempt us from preferring him in all things; we must not shame his name with our lives; we must give a day each week to worship him in spirit and in truth. Had Jesus not thought that these were important for the rich man? Absolutely not! In fact, we should see that the opposite is true. Jesus had spoken to the heart of the problem. The rich man had an idol. He needed to get rid of it before he could enter the Kingdom of God. His idol was his money and likely the position and prestige that it afforded him. Considered this way, we might say that he liked being his own idol. He had put himself in front of, even in place of God. Such a condition could be remedied in only one way: get rid of it! Sell it! Give it away! Then he could be free to follow the one who truly was God incarnate. He must follow Jesus.

So, having considered the passage in this way we should see that Jesus isn't as concerned about money as he is about idolatry. You may be breathing a sigh of relief, and congratulating yourselves that you won't have to sell up and give it all away. But it isn't as easy as that. Indeed, it is much harder. If only we could be confident that that would be the answer to our relationship with Almighty God, then selling our possessions would be a quick remedy. We could have it done this week, have an expedited close on our homes and be ready for the kingdom by the end of the month. But Jesus would still be waiting to ask us what we were planning to do with the rest of our lives. And it is here that the rich man stands as a witness against us. For it is he that ran from the crowd and fell down upon his knees in front of Jesus and asked what he must do for his soul's eternal health. It is he that had been conscientious about his moral duty all his life long. It is he that would have taken on greater burdens for the kingdom's sake. O, that we had a nation full of such moralists, there would be neither crime in the streets nor violence in our schools. Surely, he is an example that we would offer for our children and grandchildren to follow, for he was a devoted and pious fellow. But he would not follow the Christ! He would not forsake all for the kingdom. He would not take up his cross and follow Jesus to Golgotha. He would not abdicate the throne and crown Jesus there. And so his soul was lost!

Yet we should note, in closing, the great temptation that possessions place upon us in this life. They are not, in themselves, an evil. Ownership of material objects,

whether common or fine, is not sinful. The opposite, as a matter of fact, is closer to the truth. Our heavenly Father, in his love for us, pours out upon us the blessings of this life. And so we praise God from whom all blessings flow. Yet it is in the having of them that our hearts gradually begin to bind themselves to our things. I say, our hearts, because it is that very organ of affection that sits in the very middle of our being that should be given to God in all things. And yet it is our heart that tries to hold on to eternal God and temporal things. They are drifting apart. The heart cannot hold on to both indefinitely. So the heart must let go of one and cling to the other. There is nothing that assists better in the letting go of riches for God's sake than tithing. In a sermon I preached to you a few weeks ago I focused upon the positive reason for tithing: confidence in the providence of God. But here we have a negative reason for tithing. By giving away our riches, we affirm that we do not own them nor are we owned by them. By giving away 10 percent of our income, a substantial sum, we say that we are unwilling to be ruled by our possessions and instead prefer to enter into the Kingdom of God. By parting with a portion of our pittance here in a perishing world, we are saying that we would take our place in that city where the streets are paved with gold and the gates are made of precious stones. O, dear friends, by grabbing our possessions by the throat and throwing them off out of the throne rooms of our hearts, we are saying that there is no king but Jesus. Let us cast away all those things that encumber us and answer the call of Jesus. For he says to each one of us, "Come, follow me." AMEN