

The Ripple Effect

Focus: Freeing Your Heart

Mark 10:13-31

March 4, 2007

There's a joke making the rounds about a lawyer who comes to his client and says, "Look, Joe, I have some good news and some bad news." His client had been accused of murder and the lawyer had just received the report from the crime lab. "First, here's the bad news: they found your DNA everywhere at the crime scene. It's clear that you're guilty and you'll probably go to jail for the rest of your life." "O, no," the man gasped, "what's the good news?" "O, yea, you're going to love this," the lawyer said. "The lab report also said that you have very low cholesterol."

So I have some good news and bad news about our Gospel reading this morning. First the bad news: This is one of the most difficult, disturbing and surprising stories in the entire New Testament. It's not a "nice" story. So if you don't read this story and scratch your head and squirm in your seat – as I did this week - you don't get it. So I'd like to slap a label on this story: Jesus is very dangerous to our conceptions of spirituality, Christianity and what defines a "decent life." But there's also good news: as we walk through this story, we'll find an offer from Jesus that leads to real life and real freedom. This story leads us away from just a decent life and into the best life – the best life you could ever imagine. I'd like to wrap this story around three neat little points, but I'm afraid this story won't let me do that. So let's just dive in and see where it leads us. But first, let's pray.

Here's the story in a nutshell: A very rich and decent man excitedly approaches Jesus and he asks a simple question: "How do I live a decent life? I'm pretty close so just tell me how to close the deal." Jesus says, "I love you, man, but you aren't even close. So here's what you need to do: give away all your money, your stuff, your stock options, your cars, your homes, your status and focus on one thing: following me. Then you'll have a real life." That's not the answer the man was looking for; so, crushed and sad, he walks away from Jesus. Jesus just watches as a potential disciple walks away. You see, I warned you: it's not a nice story.

Now here's why it makes me squirm: First of all, I'm rich – and so are most of you. According to an internet tool, you can plug in your annual income and it will place you in a percentile for wealth across the world. Our family is fairly average for this area and we placed in the 99.4th percentile for world wealth. (Parents: feel free to use this handy statistic in your next discussion with your child: "No, Johnny, I can't buy you that new toy because we're already in the 99th percentile). So, yes, we're rich. God has been good to us – and we've worked very hard too. Secondly, we'd also like to think that we're fairly decent people. Of course good people don't brag about this, but if God divided the world into two camps – good people and bad people – most of us would be on the good side. Look at me, I know the rules: go to church, be nice to people, don't murder people, take care of my kids, give some money away, don't shoplift, avoid transfats, recycle my

plastic items and volunteer somewhere. I have my problems and my addictions and my sinful habits, but all in all, I'm a decent person. I fit the profile of the rich young ruler. I'm living a good and decent life.

So how will Jesus respond to the decent life I'm trying to build for myself and my family? Will Jesus come along and add the icing on the cake of my decent life? Let's see what he does with this decent, successful fellow that we know as the "rich young ruler."

First of all, let's set the stage for this story. The little story before this one is so important in understanding the rich young ruler story. Here's *that* story in a nutshell: some parents bring their children to Jesus so he bless them, but the disciples rebuked them. Jesus is "indignant" or, as we would say, "ticked off." So he says, "Let the children come to me for the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these." As a matter of fact, Jesus says, "if you don't receive the Kingdom of God just like these children, you'll never enter into it." Now Jesus is not suggesting that children are innocent. After about three days of parenting, you realize that children are little sinners just like we're big sinners. But children are amazingly open, receptive and dependent. Unborn children are absolutely dependent on us. We have to defend them and protect them. And after they're born, we still have to defend them and protect them. They don't have to earn anything; it's all a gift – free and pure. Jesus is saying, "That's the way it is in the kingdom of God. You come as a child – with your hand open, and your head up and your eyes bright and wide-open because you know that you're getting something good. And you don't have to earn it; you just take it and say thank you."

Verse 17 – "As Jesus started on the way" or literally "on the road." Last Sunday I said that the Gospel writer Mark uses "on the way" or "on the road" as a code word for discipleship. To believe in Jesus is to join Jesus on the road. So as Jesus is on the way, a man runs up to Him, falls on his knees and says, "Good Teacher, what must I do inherit eternal life?" In verse 22 Mark will tell us that he was a man of great wealth – and everyone back then assumed that wealth was the sign of a decent, blessed life. Here we notice his enthusiasm and his sincerity. He's eager. He's the early bird that gets worm. He's the overachiever of life. The question – What must *I* do to inherit eternal life – implies a spirituality of achievement. What can I do to get life right? How do I get right with God and stay right with God? Show me the steps, give me the tools and I'll build my own decent life.

Now you'd think Jesus would be happy to have an eager, super-achieving, confident, get-it-done kind of disciple; instead, Jesus is rather abrupt with the guy. He starts by saying, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone." This has often confused people because elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus does things and says things that imply – very strongly in fact – that he and God the Father are One. What is Jesus saying here? As we'll see in a minute, I believe that Jesus is challenging this man. Jesus is saying, "Do you even know what good means? You assume that you can just run up to me and I'll dish out some quick, simple answer to your spiritual quest. Do you really think it's that easy, my friend? Do you think I'm your Cosmic vending machine: insert

coin and find metaphysical satisfaction? You better think twice if that's what you mean by good."

Then Jesus gives a very traditional, expected answer: "You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother." By the way, as you look at the list, do you know which one of those items was not one of the Ten Commandments? It's "Do not defraud." I think Jesus added it to the list just to throw a wrench into the gears of his moral machine. It's very hard to get rich without using or just ignoring the poor around us.

Anyway, our decent, morally upstanding rich man replies with total sincerity: "Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy." Was he lying? I don't think so. He's a decent guy. Before he met Jesus, the Apostle Paul would say the same thing: (see Philippians 3:4-6). Morally speaking, he works hard on the outer shell of his appearance. There are very few chinks in his moral armor.

So this guy comes screeching up to Jesus driving 80 miles per hour – excited, inquisitive. You'd think Jesus would be impressed; instead, out of thin air Jesus erects a brick wall and let's the guy slam into it. But notice that before Jesus does anything our story tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him. Isn't that an amazing statement? The Greek word for "looked at" is an intensified compound of the normal word for look – in other words, Jesus looked intently, Jesus examined his soul, Jesus knew him inside and out. We have to assume it was an uncomfortably long look. But notice that it was an examination of love. What would happen if someone looked right into your soul and knew everything about you? Would they be shocked? Would they walk away in disgust? When Jesus looks at you he looks with eyes of love.

But that doesn't stop Jesus from telling him the truth. So often we think that love means minimizing truth. If you really love me, you should never question my lifestyle or my choices. True love tells the truth. So Jesus says, "One thing you lack." I'm sure the guy was thinking, "O, goody, just one thing. What is it? I can do it. Read the Bible a little more? I can do that. Not smart off to my parents? I can do that. Volunteer a little more? I can do that. Actually show up for worship services on time? Whoa, not sure if I can do that one, Lord. But almost anything else; just let me know, Jesus." But he didn't expect the next statement: "One thing you lack: Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven." And we read in verse 22 "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad."

Why did Jesus say this? Does that mean I have to sell everything too? Is this the norm, the prerequisite for discipleship for everyone? First of all, notice that Jesus didn't tell every wealthy person to sell everything. A rich man named Zacchaeus gave half of his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8) – but that was purely voluntary. We have no idea what the Lord asked of another wealthy disciple named Joseph of Arimathea.

So what is the key here? What is Jesus trying to say? So before we sigh with relief and say, "Whew, for a minute there I thought Jesus was going after my bank accounts and

stocks,” in this story Jesus isn’t just after our money; he’s after us. When I was a student at the University of Minnesota someone explained it to me this way: he showed me a picture of two circles. In the center of each circle there was a larger chair or a throne. (Demonstrate by pulling out a chair). On the edges of the circle there were different circles representing the activities and priorities in our life: work, hobbies, school, relationships – marriage or dating life – sports, music, etc. Whatever sat on the throne would control the activities around the edges. Then he asked me, “What is on your throne? Christ could sit on the throne; or you could put something else on the throne of your life? It could be work or your family or your marriage or your desire to get married or your hobbies. Or it could just be yourself. You have a big “I” on the throne of your life. But remember: whatever sits on the throne becomes your god and will control the other areas of your life.”

So here’s what Jesus is asking the rich young ruler to do: “Put me on the throne. Put me first. Right now you have another, lesser god on the throne: money, status, being a decent person. I don’t want a little bit of your money; I don’t want a little more of your time; I don’t want a little more of your religious efforts: I want you – all of you. Put me on the throne and I’ll give you something better – much better, infinitely better.”

Our decent, successful, wealthy young man doesn’t want that so he refuses to join Jesus on the road. And then Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “How hard it is for the rich (and the decent, I might add) to enter the kingdom of God.” Verse 24 says, “The disciples were amazed at his words.” So Jesus says it again: “Children how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man (like us!) to enter the kingdom of God.” Now some people take comfort that when Jesus mentioned the camel and needle he was actually referring to a small gate in a wall. The camel had to go on its knees in order to get through the gate, which was called the “eye of the needle.” So, according to this interpretation, if we can just humble ourselves before God, like the camel, we can get to God. But in Jesus’ day there weren’t any camels crawling through needle eyes – and this interpretation didn’t develop until the 9th century. No, Jesus really meant it: take a camel, the largest animal, and take a needle, one of the tiniest instruments around, and push the camel through the eye of the needle. That’s how likely it is for rich-young-ruler type people to get to God. In other words, it’s impossible for rich and decent people to get saved.

Now the disciples are really shocked and confused. “If this guy – who has all the trappings of success, God’s blessing and a decent life – can’t get in, then who can get saved?” Then in verse 27 we read, “Jesus looked at them” – once again, this is one of those long, uncomfortable, soul-searching, but utterly love-based looks from Jesus. And then Jesus said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” Did you catch that? Jesus is referring to the absolute impossibility of faith. Faith in God, trusting in Christ with your whole heart, getting right with God and staying right with God, isn’t just hard; it’s impossible. You can be as rich and as decent and as successful and as busy as you want; it won’t score enough points to get right with God. That’s impossible. You see, the Bible tells us not just that we have a weak and lethargic faith; it says that we’re spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-10). The Bible doesn’t just say

I'm an imperfect person who needs a little improvement; it tells me that I'm God's enemy and I have to surrender my weapons (Romans 5:9-11). But here's the good news: God can raise spiritually dead people like us. And God can change rebel-hearts like ours and make us his friends and his children.

But it also shows us that our whole life is more than possible with Christ. Let me say it this way: there are really only two options to being on the road with Jesus: I'll call the first path the "Decent Way" and the second path the "Disciple's Way." The Decent Way is all about what is proper, respectable, natural. It's the path of lukewarm Christianity – it's neither hot nor cold, it's just lukewarm. It has neither salt nor pepper; it's just blah. But it does go through the motions – but without the influence or power of the Holy Spirit. It's what some people call "cultural Christianity." So I come to Jesus because my parents did or because it gives me comfort in the face of death or meaning in the face of a cold, dying universe or it helps me act decently. But basically it still allows me to put me on the throne of my life – or maybe, in the name of Christianity, I've put my family on the throne or being a decent person on the throne or intellectual knowledge on the throne. But Jesus is floating somewhere on the outer edge of my life. He's one of the many activities in my life.

The Disciple's Way is a far cry from the Decent Way. It's begins when you know that Jesus is looking at you with love. That's where it begins. But then it continues when you hear Jesus say, "I don't want your decent, lukewarm, conventional, safe approach to faith. I want you. I don't want your activity; I want your heart. I don't just want your pocketbook; I want the heart that controls the pocketbook." And then we let Him sit on the throne.

C.S. Lewis compared the Disciple's Way to going to a dentist. When our tooth is hurting we go to the dentist. We just want relief from the pain, but the dentist has a different agenda: the dentist wants to set all of our teeth right. In the same way, Lewis said, "Our Lord is like a Dentist ... Dozens of people go to Him to be cured of one particular sin which they are ashamed of ... or which is obviously spoiling daily life ... Well, He will cure it all right: but He will not stop there. That may be all you asked: but if once you call Him in, He will give you the full treatment."

At this point you might say, "But this is impossible. I can't do this. It's too unrealistic because I know my own heart. I keep slipping back on the throne – or I keep putting something else back on the throne." Ah, here's where the good news of Jesus comes in over and over again. Here's why we keep coming back to the cross – pictured so beautifully here at the Lord's Table – to find mercy and grace. How many times can I blow it and come back? You just keep coming.

Now I have a "word from the Lord" for Three Village Church. As a pastor one of my jobs – maybe even my primary job – is to listen for the pulse of God's Spirit for this particular church. What is God saying to us as a church family? Well, based on many, many conversations over nearly six years, this is the primary thing that I believe God is trying to teach us as a church family: give up the Decent Way and enter the Disciple's

Way. Put Christ on the throne of your life – I mean, really put him on the throne of your life.

Now notice how we get from the Decent Way to the Disciples Way: it almost always comes from a hard word from the Lord himself. Jesus himself looks at us and loves us and then says, “You are so decent, but there’s one thing you lack – but it’s major thing and it’s an impossible thing: you don’t have me on the throne of your life.” Do you know how his invitation to the Disciple’s Way comes to us? It often comes when we hit a wall, an impossible wall. It often comes through a wall called health problems or relationship struggles or loneliness or grief or a loss or an addiction that we can’t shake. And it’s in this wall, this impossible thing, that the Holy Spirit wants to speak to your heart and say, “This is of me. This is my doing because I love you and I want what’s best for you. You wonder where I am in the midst of this impossible thing. I’m right here and I’m calling you, loving you, disrupting your decent life where you’re still on the throne and inviting you to something better, infinitely better: the Disciple’s Way where I’m on the throne.”

So why would we do this? Why would anyone give up the Decent Way for the Disciple’s Way? Towards the end of this story, Peter asks the same question. See verse 28. He’s really asking, “What’s in it for me?” Now we assume Jesus might say, “How dare you? What a selfish question? Never ask ‘what’s in it for me?’” Instead, Jesus more or less responds with, “That’s an honest question so you deserve an honest answer.” See verses 29-30.

Why pursue the Disciple’s Way? One word: JOY. Let me quote C.S. Lewis once again: “Keep nothing back. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.”

That’s where the ripple effect begins. How will you spend your one and only, beautiful opportunity of a life that God has given you? Pursue Christ. Pursue the Disciple’s Way. Surrender your life to Him.