

## **Hebrews 4: 12-end; Mark 10: 17-31**

### **The Rich Young Man**

When I was training in theological college, the Principal said: 'When you preach, people don't want to hear about or see your holiday snaps on Malta.' It was a comment that was followed up by how we should concentrate preaching the Word, because the Word changes lives. Holiday snaps and tales of adventure might be entertaining, but they don't contain the power of transformation. 'You either believe this is God's word or you don't', he said, holding up a floppy black leather bible. 'And if you don't, go and find something else to do.'

A few years later in my curacy, my incumbent said: 'Most people want to hear about your holidays and see your snaps, but try to weave a message in-between the stories.'

As it happens, I do believe the Word of God is living and active, and has the power to change lives; it is a sharp tool that can be used to expose, unpick and reveal. The word of God is described as the sword of the Spirit in Ephesians; in Hebrews it is sharper than a double-edged sword. There is no fudging, no hiding from it, and when spoken and received (or sometimes not received) it does not return to the Lord empty, but accomplishes that for which it has been sent.

Jesus, described as the Word in John's Gospel, speaks to the rich young man. It is, one might say, a piercing encounter.

The young man stands on the brink of a life-changing encounter; it's a liminal moment. He is not apathetic. He is serious and devout. He is not seeking to trap Jesus in clever arguments or to test him. Here is a conscientious, eager to please young man. He 'ran' up to Jesus and 'knelt' before him; evidence of enthusiasm for instruction and the proper acknowledgement of Jesus' Lordship. I stop short of suggesting that this man was humble – perhaps respectful is the better word.

What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?

And herein lies the fundamentally wrong assumption.

The rich man cannot earn his salvation. Eternal life cannot be gained by our own efforts and striving. Jesus reels off the demands of the Law forbidding stealing, fraud, not murder, and the injunction to honour father and mother. The man in question has kept all of these. Jesus knows this, so why does he reel them off? Because keeping these laws will never be enough. Salvation will be granted as a gift by faith through grace.

Jesus, looking at the man, loved him.

Jesus loved him. This man wants to do what is right and wants what Jesus has to offer – the gift of eternal life; treasure in heaven. Jesus wants him to have these gifts and wants to give them with love.

And then comes the piercing word from the Word made flesh; the word that cuts to the heart of the young man; sharp and wounding.

‘One thing you lack’, says Jesus, ‘Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and you will have the treasure you seek – treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’

The man goes away sad. Jesus has nailed the thing that keeps him from loving God with heart, soul, mind and strength; the thing that keeps him at some distance from life with God.

I was once put on the spot and asked if it was immoral to spend a £1,000 on a handbag. I said yes – think of all the life-enhancing things you could do with £1,000. The person was crestfallen but bought the bag anyway. We can choose how we use what we have.

Jesus asks a lot of this man. He does not make the same demand on others. He does not request Zacchaeus – the tax collector – to give up his wealth because on meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus takes this decision for himself. Jesus saw other wealthy people; Jairus the synagogue leader, Simon the Pharisee – both were men of social standing with servants, homes and wealth. The early church was sustained by wealthy Christian women with homes and means.

Why does Jesus pick on the rich young man and tell him to give up his wealth? It is not the wealth *per se* that is holding the young man back from wholehearted discipleship but his attitude towards it. Maybe it has become a source of idolatry; maybe it takes the place of God in

the life of the young man. Maybe this is why Jesus does not mention the first four commandments in the response he makes to the young man; *You shall have no other gods but me; you shall not make images to worship or worship anything that is not God; etc.*

For this young man, trust in his wealth and self-reliance has replaced trust in God. This is why he goes away sad. He wants to be liberated into life with God but can't give up the thing that holds him in its thrall.

'You lack one thing...'

What is the thing – or things' that keep us from single-minded devotion? What is the one thing that blocks your spiritual progress? We often struggle with demands made on us – even when it is just one. But think of what is on offer – treasure in heaven.

None of us are perfect. Our lives are spent dodging idolatry in one form or another. Who then can be saved? If this rich, upright, law abiding young man will struggle to enter the Kingdom of God, then what are the stakes for everyone else? Riches were regarded as a sign of God's blessing.

The question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' is an interesting one. Eternal life, properly understood, is about life with God in the *here and now* as much as it is about life after death. The gift of this life continually sifts us; works through us, strips us, orients us in the

direction of the Cross. But none of us can claim this life by ourselves, through our own law-abiding efforts.

Only through God is our salvation possible. Only through Christ can we enter the Kingdom of God. Not through our own efforts or means, but through the blood of the Cross. When, in humility, we can accept Christ's work, we can come boldly before God's throne and receive his mercy and grace.

Maybe we are not being asked to let go of our worldly wealth, maybe it is something else, or maybe we are being asked to let go of the fear that prevents us from opening our hands to receive what is far more precious. We become what we are by sharing and following Christ – ready to receive the imperishable gift of life that he wants to give us.

Lord Jesus,  
You loved the rich young man and you love us.  
Reveal to us the things we need to relinquish;  
the things that replace your lordship over our lives.  
Refine us in the fire of your Spirit  
and bring us at the last  
into the glory of your Kingdom  
where neither rust nor moth consume,  
nor thief destroy.

**Amen.**