

We begin our annual stewardship campaign next week, and it might appear that I could use this story to kick off that campaign a week early. But I'm not going to do that because I don't think this story is actually about money or our use of material resources, even though it's commonly known as the story of the rich young ruler. Rather, I think it's a story about grace, and how we respond to God's offer of grace in Christ Jesus.

A man in this story, it begins with a man running up to Jesus. In the other gospels we are told it's a young man, a young rich man who comes to Jesus and asks a leading question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" We don't know much about him, it would appear he was a sincere man who lived a good and upright life, he was rich, we're told he had many possessions. And the text says that Jesus looked at him and loved him.

Maybe Jesus was drawn to his vulnerability. The man was clearly successful in many ways and desiring to be good, but he recognized that there was something missing in his life. His possessions and pieties notwithstanding, he was consumed with the longing for more. "All these I have kept," he says to Jesus, when Jesus cites the commandments of Moses to him, as if to say, "I've done everything I've been taught, I've followed the religious dictates of my upbringing, I've honored the tradition, kept the rules, respected the laws, practiced the rituals, and yet I'm hungry, I'm still hungry for more, I'm unfulfilled, the life I've cobbled together is insufficient because something I could barely name is drawing me to you."

So he comes to Jesus with his question, but there's something a bit uncomfortable about the encounter of Jesus and this man, they're not quite on the same wavelength, and I think the problem starts with that opening question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" That wasn't a great question to get the conversation going, it's a question that implies that eternal life comes as a sort of prize for good behavior. The man sees eternal life as a reward, as if God's favor has to be earned.

When I was at high school there was a boy in the class, he was a bit of a smarty pants, he was called Alistair. And at the start of every school year he'd make a point of sidling up to the teachers and see

what they were looking for and how they'd be handing out prizes at the end of the year, what they'd be basing their decisions on. And invariably, at the end of every year, he would win a prize for academic achievement. And there's something of that attitude going on here. The man who comes to Jesus thinks he can earn salvation, that he can just do the right things and he'll be okay, and note what he asks, "What must I do?" He wants to open up a line of credit with God, he wants to be assured that God will log all his good works and then put a gold star by his name.

We're not told his name, it was probably Alistair, but the New Testament is very clear, that's not how things work in God's economy of grace. We're not in a credit system with God, we don't earn our salvation, although I know that many people, like this man, would like to think so. Salvation comes as a gift, not as a result of our efforts.

At my first church in London we were at the end of something called Highbury Fields, which were fields full and lined with horse chestnut trees, and at this time of year the trees would be full of chestnuts, and also there'd be lots of chestnuts on the ground. In fact, the really nice, big, juicy heavy ones were on the ground because they fell first, and yet every Sunday morning when I'd go to church I'd see young people throwing sticks and stones and trying to climb up into the tree, as if the harder they tried to find a Chestnut and to get one, the bigger and juicier it would be, but they were ignoring the lovely chestnuts on the ground that they simply had to pick up. That wasn't good enough for them, they wanted to strive to get their chestnuts.

St. Paul writes, "For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." Salvation comes as a gift from God, it's not a reward, it's not a prize, we can't earn it. We don't strive to earn God's favor or merit, we simply need to turn to him, to pray, to be humble, to ask and to receive. Salvation comes to us not as a result of our own goodness, or our good deeds, but rather because of God's love and grace.

So the short answer to the man's question is, of what must I do to inherit eternal life, is this, nothing. God

does it all. We don't have to do anything, apart from receive the gift. That's a shocking answer. We'd much rather be in control of our own destiny. That's why the disciples say to each other, "Well, who then can be saved?" They've seen this respectable, sincere religious man, a good man come to Jesus, and they've seen him go away without finding what he was looking for. The disciples are thinking, goodness me, if he's not saved, who is? Jesus replied, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God, for with God all things are possible." We can't save ourselves, it is God who saves us, it's out of our control. We have to depend on God.

And I think it's this part of the message of grace which hindered the man who came to see Jesus. We're not told much about him other than he was wealthy and he had many possessions. Money brings many things, and one of them is the belief, or rather the illusion, that we're in control of our life and our destiny. This was as true in Jesus' time as it is now. The man who came to Jesus could control where he lived, where his kids went to school, what kind of work he wanted to be doing, and he'd come to depend on his wealth, his security lay in his bank account. And there is an element in this encounter with Jesus of him wanting to control his spiritual life, even his own destiny. What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? He's got used to controlling everything.

So when Jesus challenged him to give away his money, he wasn't attacking money itself, rather the sense of self sufficiency and security that wealth can bring. Jesus is challenging the man to give up his security and come follow me, he says, "Learn to rely on me and not your wealth," he's saying. Jesus didn't call all his followers to give up material things, we know that he was friends with those with wealth who shared their possessions with him so he could carry on his ministry, but he did call all his followers to trust him. He wanted his followers to find their security in God, not in their achievements or in their possessions.

Before I close I want to offer two contrasts that are going on in this passage. The first is between this capable rich man who comes to see Jesus, and the child who features in the verse immediately preceding this story. Just before this story Jesus was

talking with children and he said, "Anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." So when Jesus says at the end of the passage that the first will be last and the last first, I think he's drawing a comparison between this man who's upright, well respected, religious member of the community, and a humble, small dependent child. In the Kingdom of God prominence is not given to those who might expect it, the rich and the powerful are not at the front of the line in God's Kingdom.

The second contrast I'd like to mention is between the theme of grace, which I've been emphasizing, and the cost of involved of following Jesus. As St. Peter said to Jesus, "We've have left everything and followed you." The wondrous free gift of grace can cost us everything. Who knows what will happen once we accept God's free gift of grace and begin our journey of following Jesus? The famous German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a famous book called *The Cost of Discipleship*. He warned of preaching cheap grace, which is grace without discipleship. The balance we need to maintain is clear in this passage, the rich man sadly missed out on the free gift of grace, and St. Peter talks about the cost of discipleship.

This is a powerful passage, we would do well to ponder it, it invites us to consider our desires. The man in the story walks away from Jesus when he realizes he doesn't actually desire eternal life as much as he thinks he does. He's hungry, yes, but not hungry enough. He recognizes that he doesn't trust the promise of treasuring heaven enough to relinquish the treasures that he has on earth. He doesn't really want to follow Jesus, he wants to admire the good teacher from a distance, a comfortable distance, and to go on living the way he's always lived.

So let us reflect on this story, to examine our desires, and to see if we would reach a different decision to the rich young man in this passage. The question for us to consider, it is what we are going to do to respond to the free gift of life and salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Amen.