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*The Costly Route to Eternal Life:
A Homiletical Meditation on Mark 10:17-22*



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As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man who had run up to him and had knelt before him asked him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he replied to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth." Looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Saddened at these words, he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property (Mark 10:17-22 [author's translation]).

Finding ourselves in this text can be a challenge, I suppose. Perhaps a sense of alienation makes it difficult for us to identify with this young man—unlike Nicodemus, who secretly meets with Jesus in the dark for spiritual counseling, asking questions that we'd like to ask. Or, unlike those mothers and fathers who brought their little children to Jesus for his blessing and benediction that we covet for our kids. We can easily identify with them. But as we read the story of Mark 10:17-22, we keep looking for a point of contact.

As we enter the narrative, we need to recover two particular facts or realities of this situation in order to understand

properly both the conversation and episode.

The first fact is that this nameless young man was a son of the covenant. This is evident from Jesus' assumption that the young man indeed *knew the commandments* that had been given by God to Moses. As a son of the covenant, this man's life was governed and directed by God's law, the Torah. Every detail of the story suggests, therefore, that the rich young ruler was a full-blooded son of Abraham.

The second reality we must recover is the validity of his *seeking eternal life*. To be sure, eternal life is a *gift*, a divine donation—and yet the Bible is clear that God's children must pursue eternal life, yearn for it, seek after it, hold on to it (see John 6:27, especially Romans 2:7, Galatians 6:8, 1 Timothy 6:12).

And that is what this encounter is all about. Our suffering Savior here reveals the costly route to eternal life. In verse 17, we see the man's upright beginning on this costly route. In verses 18-21, we hear the Savior's faithful encouragement to proceed along this costly route. And in verse 22, we observe our Savior's intensified suffering in paving this costly route to eternal life.

AN UPRIGHT BEGINNING (v. 17)

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man who had run up to him and had knelt before him asked him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"

Our first task is to understand properly the young man's question. Quite often, interpreters evaluate his query negatively. Two reasons help explain this negative evaluation.

First, many interpreters read the end of the story—the man went away sad, refusing to sell his property and follow Jesus—into the beginning of the story, concluding that this man wasn't serious after all in seeking eternal life. Given the outcome, he must have been pretending from the start.

A second widespread interpretation sees the man's question as part of a theology of works-righteousness. Here we have a typical Jew—so the interpretation runs—who is interested in *doing something to earn eternal life*. This view has received quasi-canonical status nowadays in the NIV Study

Bible note attached to this verse: "The rich man was thinking in terms of earning righteousness to merit eternal life, but Jesus taught that it was a gift to be received (see v. 15)." The note attached to the parallel account in Matthew's Gospel (19:16) reads, "The rich man was thinking in terms of righteousness by works. Jesus had to correct this misunderstanding first before answering the question more fully."

A GOOD QUESTION

If properly evaluating the young man's opening question is essential for understanding what follows in the text, then consider the following five reasons for evaluating his question *positively*.

First, in the Bible the question, "What shall I do . . .?" is a question asked quite often by those seeking salvation. In response to Peter's Pentecost sermon, his listeners "were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). Shaken by the earthquake that had rumbled through Philippi, the jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Act 16:30). So the emphasis on *doing something* seems quite natural in the context of seeking to be saved.

Second, the young ruler does not ask, "What must I do to *earn* eternal life?" but rather, "What must I do to *inherit* eternal life?" (In Matthew's Gospel [at 19:16], the question is, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do in order that I may possess [or: get] eternal life?"). Do a Bible study of God's promises in the Old Testament relating to inheritance, and you will discover that "inheritance" was a central, pivotal, essential expectation among *the faithful* in Israel. In that light, this man's covenantally proper question is being brought to the right place! God had long ago promised his soon-to-be-exiled people an inheritance, and this pious questioner had come to the right person looking for his inheritance!

Third, in each of the Gospel accounts of this episode Jesus nowhere corrects the man with respect to the substance of his question. Whereas each account relates Jesus' reply about the man calling him "good"—"Why do you call me good? No

one is good except God alone"—Jesus in fact proceeds to engage the man in terms of the very question he had asked! Jesus moves the conversation further, as if by answering: "Here's how you inherit eternal life."

Fourth, perhaps most surprising to those apt to criticize the young man's question for being motivated by a theology of works-righteousness, is the fact that Jesus answers the man by telling him *to do something*—namely, to keep the commandments! This comes out most clearly in Matthew's account: "If you want to enter life, obey [keep] the commandments" (Matthew 19:17).

Fifth, smack in the middle of the conversation—even before the young man had received Jesus' summons and turned away in sorrow—we read that *Jesus loved him*. Unqualified, no-strings-attached love for this son of Abraham, this son of the covenant, this son of the Torah.

A SIMILAR ACCOUNT: LUKE 10:25-28

Please don't confuse our story, about the rich young ruler, with a similar earlier episode that served as a prelude to the parable of the merciful Samaritan. "And a lawyer stood up in order to test Jesus, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Luke 10:25).

Notice a crucial difference: In the earlier episode of Luke 10, the lawyer posing the question intended to *test* or to *tempt* Jesus with his question. But there is no indication in any of the Gospel accounts that the rich young ruler had a negative motivation, or was acting out of hostility toward Jesus.

Incidentally, before leaving the lawyer, do notice the wonderful *similarity* between the two conversations; for here, too, Jesus replied to the lawyer's question (and I paraphrase): "Well, what is written in the Torah?" The lawyer answered, "Love God and your neighbor." Jesus replied a second time (no paraphrase!): "You have answered correctly [*orth*, straightly]. *Do this and you will live*" (Luke 10:28). Here we learn that although the *motive* of the lawyer's question was hostile toward Jesus and therefore anti-covenantal, the *content* of his question apparently was not!

TONGUE IN CHEEK?

Back to the rich young ruler.

Jesus never corrected the rich man's question, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" The Savior didn't reply, "Well, let's see, first we need to rephrase your question, young man. For it's not at all a matter of *doing*. Why, you've got the stick by the wrong end, don't you know?" Rather, after clarifying the issue of his identity in relation to the Father, Jesus launches immediately into his answer: "You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'"

We all know the young man's reply: "*Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth.*"

Often this is where many interpreters import something to help them solve whatever riddles they imagine in the text. Many allege that this answer betrays the man's arrogant self-righteousness, or his honestly misguided theology. Listen again to the NIV Study Bible: "The man spoke sincerely, because for him keeping the law was a matter of external conformity. That the law also required inner obedience, which no one can fully satisfy, apparently escaped him completely."

External conformity versus inner obedience. There you have it. That's the dilemma, the dichotomy, the dualism to which the rich young ruler has allegedly succumbed. Pitiably, misguided Jew, he is.

Interpreters committed to this explanation seem almost eager to interrupt the Savior, straining to whisper loudly over his shoulder to answer the young man: "No, sir, you just *think* you've kept all these commandments since you were a boy. Don't you know that nobody can keep the law?"

But what, instead, was Jesus' immediate, theological response? "*Looking at him, Jesus loved him.*"

So, then, what part of this conversation was a misguided delusion? The young man's opening question? I don't think so. He came with his theologically correct question to the theologically correct place. He came to the Savior.

Was the Savior's first reply—"You know the commandments. Do them and you will live"—off the mark? I don't believe so. As I hope to show, with this answer our Savior was being entirely faithful to divine revelation, to his office, and to the Father's mission.

Was the rich young ruler's claim about his personal obedience from boyhood, then, an arrogant retort born of self-righteousness that rested upon the merit of his works? Nothing in the text—*nothing* in the text—suggests that to have been the case.

That leaves but one possibility. I shudder to ask what must remain, for all of us, a rhetorical question: Was the Savior's *love*, then, counterfeit or misguided? God forbid! Jesus loved the rich young ruler *for his answer!* Jesus loved him as a son of the covenant, a son of the Torah.

God forbid that we should *add* to the Bible, we who are so committed to the authority and infallibility of the *text* of Scripture. May God keep us from seeking to "rescue" the Savior by adding to Mark 10:21: "Looking at him, Jesus loved him *despite his arrogant self-righteousness.*"

So we have seen that the man's question was a good question: "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" A proper question. Life's most basic and important question, *equivalent* to: What must I do to be saved?

With his question the young man had come to the right place—better: to the right Person. As Simon Peter said on another occasion, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (John 6:68). This means, among other things, that Messiah Jesus has the words that impart and bestow eternal life—living and abiding words that generate abiding life. How could it be otherwise? The Word-made-flesh speaks his words-to-flesh, and that flesh lives! O Lazarus, come forth!

Moreover, as a son of Abraham, this rich man was also a *bar Mitzvah*, which literally means a "son of the commandment," a son of Moses. Most surprising of all, perhaps, is that Jesus answered the man and loved him (as people like to put it nowadays) "where he was at."

Up to this point, the conversation was on the level—shall we say, on the up and up? There are no games, no double entendres, no pretense.

THE SAVIOR'S FAITHFUL ENCOURAGEMENT

Now let's look more deeply into Jesus' entire reply, in which he is faithful (1) to his sender, (2) to God's revelation, and (3) to his mission.

The young man knelt before Jesus (don't miss the Bible's frequent indications of space, posture, gestures, etc.), a posture of respect and subservience, something a slave would do, or an underling. "Good Teacher," he begins, "what must I do that I may inherit eternal life?" In reply, Jesus uses the man's address as a point of contact: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."

Once again, let's savor the tone and texture of Jesus' words. Were they designed to be somewhat off-putting, a verbal stiff-arm, a correction of this young man's impetuosity? Is Jesus here rejecting the man's identification of him as God? Many Bible interpreters seem to think one or more of these is true, based in part on their assumptions about the relationship between the various parallel accounts of this episode in the Gospels (such as: Mark's was written earlier than Matthew's).

I don't believe so. Jesus did not reply, "Don't call me 'good.'" Rather, his "why" question is coupled closely with an explanation opening up the meaning of "goodness" in terms of its divine source: God. In other words, Jesus' opening reply is not designed for *correction*, but for *reflection*. Jesus picks up the man's form of address, whose meaning the rich man seems to have understood only in part, and shows him that it is "worth" far more than he might realize. God alone is the Good Teacher—and here is Jesus walking around Palestine claiming to be sent from God. Put two and two together, and what should you get? *Jesus is Immanuel, God among us!* So finding the way to God (eternal life) will have something to do with *really* coming to the "Good Teacher"—Messiah Jesus.

Here, then, by pointing the rich young inquirer to God as the source of goodness, Jesus is being faithful to his Sender

and at the same time inviting the man to identify Messiah Jesus with God! This is part one of Jesus' reply.

OBEDIENCE AND LIFE

In verse 19 Jesus summarizes God's commandments, focusing on the so-called second table of the law, which deals with neighbor love. It's not that Jesus' summary ignores the "first table" (love to God), for loving one's neighbor *was* (part of) serving God. Far from ignoring the first table of the law, Jesus will in fact be seeking to enforce it. But that will come later.

At this point we must pause to ask a very pious question: *Why? Why did Jesus say this? Why these words, these commandments, rather than something else? Why did Jesus take the time to recite each of these precepts?*

I think it's because *Jesus is looking back to divine revelation in the Old Testament*. In so many places, in so many ways, the Lord had told his beloved people Israel, his redeemed-from-Egypt, set-free-to-serve-God people Israel: "The person who walks in my precepts will live."

Consider Deuteronomy 4:1:

Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

Munch on Deuteronomy 4:1 with these questions in mind:

- When is "now"?
- Who is "Israel"? (Hint: custodians of the globe-embracing Abrahamic promise; saved from bondage; about to enter the life that had been promised [Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:18] and for which they had been saved [Exodus 3:8,17; 13:5])
- What, do you suppose, links the verbs: listen—perform—live—go in—possess? What's the "glue" binding them?

Next, look at Deuteronomy 30:16:

... in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it.

Once again, notice the formulation: "Do 'a' *that* 'b' may follow." You love, walk, and keep—so that you may live, multiply, and be blessed. You love, walk, and keep—so that I may supply, multiply, and bless.

One more, Leviticus 18:5:

So you shall keep my statutes and my judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the Lord.

Rather inescapable, isn't it? This divine connection between "obedience" and "life"?

LIFE, THEN OBEDIENCE

Let's take a breather here, and try to figure out this connection between obedience and life.

It should be clear to any careful Bible reader that when God spoke (through Moses) the words of Deuteronomy 4:1 and 30:16, and Leviticus 18:5, he was speaking to a people *already redeemed* from Pharaoh's bonds, liberated from Egypt's slavery. The meal celebrated in Jewish homes in Egypt on the evening of the exodus would be ordained for a national celebration every year thereafter by faithful Israel as the Passover. Nisan 14 was the day for celebrating when Israel was brought from death to life, from bondage to freedom.

Life, then obedience. That's the "order" of covenant history in the Old Testament, an order engraved on our own hearts with these words heard each Lord's Day in our worship:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6).

This is the prologue or preamble of the Decalogue. It testifies of rescue and redemption, of divine life-giving grace. Then come the Ten Commandments—all about *doing*. Don't do this . . . do that.

Knowing what you know now, would you say that God expected Israel's obedience to serve as the *basis* or *ground* or *source* of her life?

Heaven forbid! God's law to Israel, his commandments and precepts for obedience, were all given in the context of grace—*after* the exodus, *after* Egypt, *after* redemption. Life, then obedience. That is the first aspect of the connection between obedience and life.

OBEDIENCE: THE PATH OF LIFE

There were two poles: exodus and entrance. Both of grace, both God's doing. Between them lay Sinai.

In the Old Testament, obedience to God's law never was the path *to* life, but it was always the path *of* life. Obedience to God's law was not the route to salvation, but the path salvation took in the life of God's children. Never do we read anywhere in the Old Testament that God gave his law to Israel in order that by keeping it, Israel might earn salvation and eternal life. Nowhere in the Old Testament is God's law, or keeping God's law, presented as the basis or ground or source of salvation. First came the exodus, then Sinai!

This means, among other things, that when Jesus came, he didn't set about undoing Sinai—repealing the law of Moses. In fact, Jesus stated unambiguously that he had come not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17-20). He had come not to present an alternative salvation-system than the pattern God had for centuries been teaching Israel. *Jesus Christ was therefore not God's second try!* From the Garden (Genesis 3:15) through Ur of Chaldees and exodus and Sinai and Canaan and exile, to Bethlehem and Galilee and finally Jerusalem, Jesus Christ had always been "the way, the truth, and the life." Nobody came (or comes) to the Father—neither Abraham, nor Moses, nor David—except by him!

This reality led the Reformers to acknowledge that the Bible narrates the history of one covenant of grace under two modes or kinds of administration. The Bible's story teaches one way to salvation, the way of divine grace that leads to obedience. The law that God gave Israel through Moses "is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Romans 7:12).

If the connection between obedience and life must be explained *first* as "Life, *then* obedience," it must be explained *second* to be "Life *as* obedience."

"FROM MY YOUTH"

What we're learning from this encounter between Jesus and the rich young man is that inheriting eternal life is inextricably related—somehow—with obedience to God's law. Soon Messiah Jesus will call the man further, not *beyond* or *against* the law, but to the law's destination: Jesus Christ himself (see Galatians 3:24). In a moment, the Savior will summon him not to reject Moses, but to follow the One-Greater-than-Moses, Jesus himself.

What about the man's reply, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth"? Was it arrogant? Blasphemous? Misguided? No more so than these faith-declarations sung by an Old Testament friend of God:

*The Lord has rewarded me
according to my righteousness;
according to the cleanness of my hands
he has recompensed me.*

*For I have kept the ways of the Lord,
and have not acted wickedly against my God.*

*For all his ordinances were before me,
and as for his statutes,
I did not depart from them.
I was also blameless toward him,
and I kept myself from my iniquity.*

*Therefore the Lord has recompensed me
according to my righteousness,
according to my cleanness
before his eyes.*

(2 SAMUEL 22:21-25)

These words were sung by David, not as an arrogant boast to his enemies, but as a confession of faith in God before Israel. This was a pious song, a believing ballad recounting the deliverance of the Lord in terms of David's faith-obedience.

And then this: Looking at the rich young ruler, the Great Son of David loved him.

COME FOLLOW JESUS

In response to his query about doing something to inherit eternal life, our Savior provided a very basic and personal summons: "Come, follow Me."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had often sounded this summons, usually to those he was gathering around himself as disciple-learners. Simon and Andrew, James and John had all heard a similar call as they were either fishing or repairing their fishing gear (Mark 1:16-20). Later Levi the tax collector joined the Master at his summons (Mark 2:14). Frequently this call to follow Jesus was accompanied with the call to self-denial and cross-bearing (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34). Following Jesus is demanding business, as those men learned who either volunteered to follow Jesus or had decided to keep their promise to follow him after they had taken care of other earth-bound interests (Luke 9:57-62).

Here in Mark 10, this calling to accompany Jesus was a special invitation to become, at this late hour, one of Jesus' circle of followers. Special, because many who had come to Jesus with their questions or their needs had been summoned to believe in Jesus but not called to follow him (for one example, see Mark 5:19). The command to believe in Jesus was general, but this call to accompany the Master was special.

We need to ask: Why *this* reply of the Savior to *this* particular question about doing something to inherit eternal life, posed by *this* rich young man?

Surely this particular man, a ruler in Israel (Luke 18:18), was aware that the Sanhedrin was already planning to put Jesus to death? Even now Jesus was heading for the last time to Jerusalem, the City of God, his final destination of desertion and death (see Mark 8:31; 9:31; and 10:32). Jesus had left everything behind—in Nazareth, in Capernaum, in heaven itself—to walk to Jerusalem as the suffering, impoverished Mediator for God and his people. *This suffering, impoverished One* is the Good Teacher whom the rich young ruler must accept, and this is *how* he must accept him—not simply as one before whom he was to kneel, but as one whom he was to follow en route to Jerusalem, to the cross.

This is what the apostle Paul saw years later, when he wrote, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you *through his poverty* might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9). If eternal life is the believer's inheritance, then the pathway we travel toward receiving that inheritance is the pathway of suffering, of impoverishment, of self-denial, finally, of death. This was the route Jesus, the pioneer of our salvation, opened. This pathway the apostle Peter described in words saturated with imagery of a waiting inheritance, of perseverance through suffering, and of faith purified unto praise:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen

him, you love him, and though you do not see him now, but believe in him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:3-9).

OUR SAVIOR'S INTENSIFIED SUFFERING

"Saddened at the remark, he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property" (Mark 10:22).

We must pay careful attention to the order of this description. First, the man became gloomy, his face turning as red and overcast as a storm-filled sky (the same word is used in Matthew 16:3 for just such an appearance). Then he left, sorrowing, deeply grieved. Both his demeanor and his departure are explained for us. Not because he was angry or ignorant, but because he was attached to the wealth of this world: "for he was a man who owned much property" (or "had many possessions").

Perhaps you find the heading, "Our Savior's intensified suffering," quite puzzling, even beside the point. Isn't the text telling us something about the young man, after all?

True enough, the heart of the verse is that the rich young ruler left. But what did he leave? We could rather ask: *Whom* did he leave? He left Jesus Christ! This Jesus, who is heading to the cross, now without this man among his followers. This man refused the terms and the sacrifice; and he thereby added to the suffering and isolation whereby our Savior would secure the very thing the young man had been seeking: eternal life.

COVENANT AND CULTURE—UNDER CHRIST

The issue, clarified so sharply by the Savior, is indeed the issue of following Jesus, God's Son and the righteousness of Israel. The cost of inheriting eternal life is the price of following Jesus. And the cost of following Jesus is . . . dying. For the young ruler, the price was his wealth. Later in verse 29, Jesus expands the list of loyalty choices to include family relationships and material fortune. Dying to self and following Jesus, by cutting the heartstrings by which we are so attached to

good, God-created earthly relationships (family, friends), God-given blessings (possessions, jobs, hobbies), God-given attributes (power, beauty).

But notice the character of what is "left behind" for Jesus: family, work, capital resources—everything that for many people makes life worth living. These are *good* relationships, in the sense that God created family and work, and gave us all things to use in his service. Creational, covenantal, cultural "goods" that Scripture elsewhere extols.

Yet, precisely here lies the mystery of entering the Kingdom of God, I think. That mystery is this: everything belonging to that wonderful arrangement the Bible calls "covenant" and everything belonging to that human dominion enterprise for which we were created (what we call "culture") must be subordinated to dying with Christ and suffering with him, as we travel the pathway toward the coming Kingdom.

Beware, however, for this mystery has a dangerous side to it. The warning is this: even covenant relationships (brothers, sisters, mother, father, and children) and covenant blessings (house, farms) can become an impediment to following Jesus!

Rejoice as well, for this mystery has an encouraging side to it. The promise is this: the relationships and blessings left behind to follow Jesus will be rewarded with their return in disproportionate measure, *in the present*, along the route of persecution, a reward whose climax is eternal life itself.

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