

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
October 25, 2009

Opting Out!

Mark 10:17-31

Key verse: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’” (Mark 10:21)

Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, once said, “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, mind, and the purse.” It was this last conversion with which Jesus dealt when the rich young man asked, “...what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v. 17)

Certainly, the challenge Jesus gave this young man—“sell what you own, and give the money to the poor”—is not required of everyone. This instruction really makes sense only if we understand that, for this young man, his love of money and things had become his *idol*. Materialism had taken God’s rightful place on the throne of this man’s heart and life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, “Our hearts have room only for one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord.”

The Lord doesn’t require everyone to get rid of all material possessions. That doesn’t mean, however, that everyone doesn’t need the “conversion of the purse.” This story from the life of Jesus should challenge us all to think deeply about the place of money and possessions in our lives. *Do I have my “stuff,” or does my stuff have me? Has money become an idol in my life, taking the place that only God should have?*

This is the central point of this week’s text. Another important point concerns the relationship of good works to salvation. The young man’s question, remember, is “...what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” His focus is on earning salvation by his own efforts, but Jesus shifts the focus to salvation as a gift to be received.

“Why do you call me good?” asks Jesus (v. 18). Jesus is not denying his own goodness. He is leading the young man toward realizing that salvation comes through reliance on God. This same point has just been made in the verses that precede our text, verses 13-16. (And remember, in Bible interpretation, *context* is so important.) In the preceding verses, Jesus teaches that God’s kingdom must be received “like a little child” (v. 15). That is, God’s kingdom—eternal life—must be received as a gift, not achieved by human effort.

On this same point, it may be that seeking to earn or pay for salvation is a particular temptation of people who are materially successful. For example, the Associated Press reported that Warren Buffet, the world's second-richest man at the time, announced he would donate 85 percent of his \$44 billion fortune to five charitable foundations. Concerning this generous gift, Buffet reportedly said: "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way."

The "conversion of the purse," the problem of *salvation by works*—these are two significant issues raised by this week's text. A third is implied by the disciples' response to Jesus' statement, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" (v. 23). Mark says "the disciples were perplexed at those words" (v. 24). Then Jesus added, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 25). The disciples' response is again telling: "They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?'" (v. 26)

This interchange indicates the disciples' struggle with what was then a common misconception: that *health and wealth are always a direct indication of God's special favor*. Many falsely believed that if a person was healthy and wealthy, he must be right with God. On the other hand, many believed, people who were sick or poor must have done something terribly wrong to incur God's curse on them.

Jesus and the New Testament writers consistently corrected this false belief. Yet, the "health and wealth" gospel is still around today. "Trust Jesus and He'll make you rich," or some variation of this idea, is as wrong today as it was in Jesus' day. God surely loves and blesses his children, sometimes but *not always* with health and wealth!

This story of the rich young man challenges us to think carefully and honestly about the place of money and possessions in our lives. The fact that Jesus discerned the *heart* of this young man is significant. No matter how much we have and how much we give, for each of us, it is ultimately a matter of the heart.

Brandon O'Brien made this point powerfully when he wrote:

"I've given several lousy gifts in my short lifetime, but an especially bad one stands out among the rest.

"When I was in first or second grade, my school hosted a gift shop that offered us the chance to buy Christmas gifts for our parents. The school sent a catalog home with us a couple of weeks before the sale, so I looked it over and found the perfect items for my parents. On the appointed day, I pulled some birthday money out of my piggybank and headed to school.

"My class filed down the hall to the room where all the merchandise was kept. I walked in with great intentions; I walked out with a bag full of stuff for myself. I remember vividly that all I could afford for my dad by the end of my shopping spree

was a package of miniature screwdrivers, each less than an inch long, attached to a key chain.

“I felt guilty that I’d skimped. My dad’s gift was an afterthought; I gave him the leftovers after I bought what I wanted. What really stung, though, was that Dad displayed those screwdrivers proudly from the rearview mirror in his truck for years. To me, they served as a monument to my selfishness. But as far as I know, my dad thought the screwdrivers were a gift from the heart, so he loved them because they were from me.

“In one sense, God is just like my father. He is always thrilled by my gifts, however meager, as long as he knows they are given from the heart. In another sense, though, God is quite different from my dad. He knows when I’ve given poorly because I’m selfish; he knows when my gift is an afterthought—a leftover—and such gifts are an affront to him. In other words, God is not concerned primarily with the gift, but the giving. He is grieved when I give reluctantly from my surplus. But in his great mercy, the Father celebrates the trifle given from my poverty” (from PreachingToday).

What we have, what we give, what we keep for ourselves—all are matters of the heart, and indicators of our heart relationship with God. By God’s grace, are you experiencing a “conversion of the purse”?

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