

*Lord, open our ears to hear your Word spoken to us; Open our hearts to be changed by Your Spirit. Amen.*

*Do you think I was wrong to walk away?  
When Jesus himself was inviting me to be one of his followers, to walk with him?  
I knew how holy he was – I knew he was the real deal.  
I've met a lot of religious teachers – he had the kind of authority I could trust.  
I wanted him to like me. I wanted him to be impressed with how virtuous  
and spiritual I was. I thought he'd say,  
"Great! Just keep doing what you're doing – God is happy with you."*

*I wasn't prepared for.... For that. For him to ask that of me.  
Did he ask that of anybody else?  
Oh, I know his close disciples left their families and livelihoods behind,  
but they were pretty poor to begin with. And I did hear about that tax collector,  
repaying everyone he'd bilked four times what he'd taken them for.  
But I didn't cheat anyone. I just happen to be wealthy.  
My family has been influential for a long time, and we're wealthy. We can't help it.*

*Did he really expect me to walk away from my responsibilities to my family,  
my business? What about taking care of my employees?  
My responsibilities to be a good steward of the wealth entrusted to me?  
Why was he asking me to sell it all and give it all to help the poor?  
I didn't make them poor. I can't help everybody.*

*I'll never forget the way he looked at me before he said it.... With real love.  
He looked at me like he saw right through me, into my heart.  
He knew I was good at keeping God's law... but was my heart pure?  
If my heart were pure, would I have been able to say yes?  
I don't think he expected me to get a pure heart and then say yes...  
nobody has that. I think he was asking me to say yes, leave behind the things  
that distracted me from God, and come be one of his close friends...  
knowing that's the only way my heart would ever get pure.  
And I couldn't do it.*

So – who are you in this story?  
The man who wanted to be close to God, but not that way?

The disciples who were stunned when Jesus said,

“It is so hard for people with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.”

The disciples were shocked, because in that time – as in much of America today – wealth and possessions were seen as a sign of God’s blessing.

If the wealthy have trouble entering the Kingdom of God, who can be saved?

And Jesus responds by reminding them that salvation is not ours to secure – It is God’s to give.

In God all things are possible – so even the wealthy can be saved. And the poor.

When Jesus says, “It is so hard for people with wealth to enter the Kingdom of heaven,” he isn’t being judgmental or punitive – he is simply observing a reality.

He doesn’t say God values the rich more than the poor, or the poor more than the rich. Jesus wants to remove the obstacles between us and God.

Jesus is not saying the gates are barred – he’s saying we lay down our own obstacles.

What happens when we have many possessions, like this man in the story?

We have to work hard to buy them,

we have to protect them from theft and the elements,

we have to find space to store them, occasionally we have to show them off.

So we work long hours, we get stressed out, we live in anxiety and competition.

These possessions of ours don’t just serve us – they become our masters.

Who has time for a spiritual life? Who has space for a relationship with God?

It’s this treadmill that Jesus is inviting this man – and us – to step off.

Jesus is offering to set this man free – the same offer he makes to us, all the time.

This man was so close... so close! I think maybe Jesus asked such a radical thing of him because he was already so close. Just take the next step, Jesus says in love.

Walk away from all that bondage, and come, walk with me.

Walk away from all that religion and enter into relationship with God through me.

Not an hour a week, or when you remember to pray – walk with me all the time.

Why is it so hard to say yes? Because I haven’t, not fully. I’m on the slow track.

I have way more than I need, and yet sometimes I worry I will not have enough.

Anyone else here resemble that remark?

I know I’m not alone – our highways are dotted with storage facilities,

because we have no room for all the stuff we buy.

Meanwhile, others don’t have enough to eat – not because they are morally deficient or lazy; because they haven’t had the advantages we have had,

family wealth, access to education and healthcare and resources and networks of people to help when we're in trouble.

*"How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God."*

Not because the wealthy are bad or greedy –

because sometimes we can't see where we're going.

When we value this stuff of ours so much, when we don't see that by sharing our wealth we could ease life for someone with less, we are turned away from God.

When we release our grip on it we are better able to see the people around us instead of the wealth we value.

Maybe we become able to value the people around us more than the wealth.

Maybe we become less able to tolerate seeing someone else begging,

or children in other countries dying for the lack of \$2 worth of food a day,

or women dying in childbirth for the lack of medical care and clean water.

When our attention is on our own stuff, our wealth, our family, our security, we don't see others around us as connected to us.

When we release our grip, we might have to let more of the world's pain in – and be moved to participate with God in alleviating that pain where we can.

It's one of those things where, the more we do it, the easier it becomes.

And it's easier when it's particular: responding to a particular need – buying a week at the Thunderbird motel for a family in crisis, or providing groceries.

I didn't know if I could send \$1,000 a year to support a child orphaned by AIDS in Kenya, on top of a 10% pledge, but I started in 2006, and I'm still fine.

One young American woman spent time with those children in Kenya,

and when she got back she talked about how much joy she saw,

and then said, "I also learned that I have a lot of stuff. I can share more."

We can share more. It's easier when we do it together, multiplying our impact.

This week you will get a letter inviting you to estimate how much you think you can give to support God's mission at Christ Church in 2022.

That letter is not a request for your hard-earned dollars.

That letter is an invitation into a deeper relationship with God,

to an exercise of faith, an exercise in letting go and trusting more.

If we're going to live in total freedom – which means total reliance on God –

we're going to walk out of our bondage to our toys and our bank accounts.

With humans it is impossible – but with God, all things are possible. Amen?

*Hello again. You don't know what happened to me, did you?  
The gospel writers never said – maybe they didn't know.  
It took me awhile. Well, it took me twenty years, actually... long after Jesus had  
been nailed to that cross. Long after they found the tomb empty.  
Long after the persecutions of his followers began.*

*I watched all that happen from a distance,  
with a kind of horror, and guilt, and relief.  
Horror that everybody who could have stood up for him –  
people of power like me – disappeared,  
let the Jewish leaders and the Roman leaders play out their political games.  
Guilt, because there's never been a day that I haven't thought about  
the invitation he gave me, that I turned down. Relief... because there's never  
been a day I haven't thought about the invitation he gave me, that I turned down.*

*Except the invitation didn't go away.  
It was seared into me along with that look of pure love he gave me.  
When I began to hang around with his followers and then to worship with them in  
their homes, I found out that he hadn't gone away – he was present in the  
stories we told about him, in the bread and wine we shared, in his Spirit which  
became more powerful in us when we prayed, in his love lived out among us.  
It took me awhile to let that love in –  
I was afraid he wanted to take away everything that mattered most to me.  
After awhile I realized Jesus mattered most to me.  
God mattered most to me. That love mattered most to me.*

*So I let go of those things that had held me back. I liquidated my assets.  
I set up a trust for my children – they'll have to come to this choice on their own.  
I set up a foundation to help educate other children,  
because I came to see that all children were my children.  
And I set out to join the band of those who follow Jesus – he's still leading.  
My life is richer and freer and simpler than I could ever have imagined.*

*With God, all things are possible. Even parting with what you think you own.  
Because it's not about what you think you own – it's about who owns you.*

*Amen.*

**Mark 10:17-31**

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." 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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them 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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

**Amos 5:7,10-15**

Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!  
They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain,  
    you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them;  
    you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.  
For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins--  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.  
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.  
Seek good and not evil, that you may live;  
    and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.  
Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate;  
    it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.