

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.”

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Imagine. Imagine kneeling directly in front of that which you desire most, that which you *love* the most and which loves you more than you can possibly comprehend. Finally kneeling at the crest of a glorious conclusion to your entire purpose for being alive with only the thinnest veil, like wet tissue, separating you. All you need to do is let go of what you are holding and reach out.

Just so, a seeker comes to Jesus while he is teaching in Judaea. He comes not to debate fine points of the law, not to challenge Jesus, but on his knees. A true seeker of truth, he kneels respectfully before the gate to that which he most desires. “Good teacher,” he begins...

And then Jesus gently probes the man’s awareness: “Why do you call me good?” as if asking “Are you aware of how close you are to inheriting the life you seek?” He responds to the seeker with a mutual respect that pacifies the man, allowing Jesus to get beside him.

The seeker must be right on the cusp of seeing the light. Jesus skillfully acknowledges the seeker’s current spiritual awareness as he enriches the path he has already walked by pointing out the wealth of spiritual resources already available to him. “You know the utterances,”

Jesus says, and then he lists the points of the Decalogue concerning relationships with other people.

And then comes one of the most gorgeous moments in all of Mark's Gospel: Jesus *looks* at him and *loves* him. Really and truly *seeing* him, everything that Jesus is about to offer is steeped in love. Only then does Jesus offer the seeker a challenge intended to magnetize him into action; a summons to step into a new creation, the new and eternal life that he has been looking for.

"You lack a single thing," Jesus says. He is not criticizing or chastising. He has seen the one thing that this specific seeker needs, not every seeker, but the one move that this unique child of God needs to make to break out into the next phase of his spiritual life. "Go," Jesus says with love, "sell whatever you possess and give it to the destitute, and you shall have treasury in the heavens, and come and follow me."

And right on the verge of cutting through the veil, at the very moment he is poised to obliterate what separates him from his heart's deepest desire, the seeker shrinks back instead. He allows his possessions to grip him and hold him back. So close to the fulfillment that he so clearly yearns for, he turns away in sadness.

Even so, Jesus continues to hold the seeker with love. He knows how hard it is for people to break addictions to material accumulation. Money and material possessions are not themselves evil or even problematic. Our devotion, our dedication, to gathering and owning does lead to mischief.

Recognizing our human frailty, Jesus turns to his followers to tell them how difficult it is to let go of our things so that we can reach out and tear the wet tissue paper separating us from the realm of heaven. Mark's Greek uses a word that appears only here in this story: "How squeamishly," Jesus says of the seeker, "How squeamishly those with riches shall enter the kingdom."

He uses the word only one other time: "Children," he says to his followers, "How squeamishly will *anyone* with riches enter the kingdom." The pursuit of material ownership is a hindrance, but so too is chasing after spiritual experiences or racking up good deeds. Collecting these non-material riches is what Tibetan Buddhist master Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche called "spiritual materialism."

So even if Peter and the disciples have left all their material possessions behind, if their hearts and minds are grasping, trying to hold anything for themselves, they may still be unable to receive God's

grace. The way to break the habits of any kind of materialism is to stay focused on the goodness and grace of God. Always seeking Christ releases our grip on anything but God so that our hearts, minds and bodies can be receptive to the self-giving Spirit.

Because the reign of God enters this realm when we hold it just long enough to give it to others. We can't find and *hold* heaven for ourselves. We see it on this earthly plane only when we give it away.

Let me tell you a story. Ryōkan Taigu was a Soto Zen monk and poet who lived an austere and humble life in a thatched hut at the foot of Mount Kugami in Japan, miles away from the nearest town. One evening, while Master Ryōkan was out teaching, a thief came to the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal.

When Ryōkan returned, he bumped into the thief. "You must have come a long distance to visit me," Ryōkan said to the prowler, "and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away.

Ryōkan sat naked in the moonlight, watching the retreating figure of the thief. "What a poor fellow," he sighed, "I wish I could give him this beautiful moon."

Now, on one level, it's a lovely story about moonlit generosity. But in Zen stories, the beautiful moon often symbolizes our deepest, essential nature, which in Christian terms, is our unity with the radiant and penetrating light of Christ.

The seeker could have opened his hands to receive that moon; to take into himself the realm of heaven that Jesus freely offered. Instead, he chose to close his hands and remained attached to what he had acquired. He went away with his possessions in much the same way that the thief slunk away with Ryōkan's shabby clothes.

I can imagine Jesus thinking something very similar to Ryōkan's lament: "What a poor fellow. I wish I could give him the infinite love that is his birthright as a child of God."

Temporal life – earthly, embodied life – is radically insecure. No time-bound self-centered strategy can change that. No matter how much we collect in material or spiritual riches, we still die. Accepting that reality as the way of things is the beginning of wisdom.

There is another reality, a more squeamish reality, that may be even harder to take in. We are, each of us, children of both time and eternity; both finite and infinite, living in pulses of the mundane and the transcendent. Our yearning for God alone centers us in the eternal while

freeing us to live in this world with an inner life of peace and an outer life of service.

In contrast to a world that promotes self-preservation and self-promotion as the path to glory, the central mystery in Mark's Gospel is this: life freely given for others is life at its fullest and most meaningful. Life *given by choice*, that is, relying only on the grace of God is the way that Jesus gave his life for us.

We will still have to handle material things, we just don't have to be attached to them. We care for material things because they are God's, not because we own them. What God created is good and we can be good stewards of whatever material or spiritual riches come our way. We can't store them in some kind of doomed savings account intended to deny death, but we can gather them and tend to them as a legacy and a pathway for those who come after us.

Always seeking Christ frees us to engage the world we wander without domination or delusion. We can hold possessions without allowing them to hold us.

Makes me wonder: what am I—what are you—still clutching as we come to Christ on our knees like the rich, young man? What camels are we trying to drag through the eye of the needle into the mystery of the always, already present and absolute love of Christ?

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