

[Mark 10:17-31](#)

In 1978, a landmark book on Christians and simple lifestyle was published. Entitled 'Rich Christians In An Age Of Hunger' and written by Ronald Sider, one of the most startling quotes in the book is this:

What 99 percent of all Western Christians need to hear 99 percent of the time is: "Give to everyone who begs from you" and "sell your possessions".¹

And maybe that's why today's passage is so uncomfortable for us. We see what happens to the rich man in this story, and we fear Jesus might require the same of us.

So what does our reading teach us? Well, its theme is discipleship, so the question is, what does it teach us about discipleship?

Firstly, we learn that *Jesus comes first*. That's the essence of discipleship. We see this in the way that the man has obeyed all the commandments – well, at least outwardly. Jesus even throws in a commandment that isn't one of the Ten Commandments when he includes 'You shall not not defraud' (verse 19) – or, as some manuscripts put it more fully, 'You shall not defraud the poor.'

Yet that's not enough, according to Jesus.

²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'

It's not simply that the man is expected to follow the religious rules, even if he can keep them. He has to obey Jesus.

That gets to the heart of Christian discipleship. We can't appear before God and say, 'I kept the rules. I was a good, moral person.' Plenty of people think that's what makes a Christian, but it isn't, according to Jesus. We cannot pride ourselves on our character and think that's what earns us a heavenly pass. It isn't. At the Last Judgment, there will be millions of so-called 'good people' who are on the wrong end of Jesus' verdict.

Why? Because they didn't put him first. They didn't listen to him and do what he asked them to do. The rich man wanted to inherit eternal life, but he didn't want to put Jesus first.

And as he learned, putting Jesus first means sitting lightly to other things. They must not compete for our affections. What we have is not ours anyway, but something which God has entrusted to our care. If Jesus needs it for something else, as here, then the Christian disciple needs to obey her Lord.

Among the wider group of his disciples, others treated wealth and possessions differently. We hear at the end of our reading from Peter about how he and the Twelve have given up so much to follow him. We know from other parts of the Gospel such as Luke 8 that others put their wealth at Jesus' disposal in other ways, such as the women of means who provided for him and his entourage. Each of them in different ways was putting Jesus first.

Perhaps each of us should pause and consider what is stopping us from putting Jesus first in our lives.

Secondly, we learn that *Jesus' love is uncompromising.*

Did you notice that? I didn't say 'unconditional love', which is what we often talk about. I said, 'uncompromising love.'

I think it's quite amazing that we read 'Jesus looked at him and loved him' at the beginning of verse 21. We know how Jesus was concerned for the poor. It would have been easy to be aggressive and hateful towards a wealthy person, such as this man – and indeed I have often seen Christians show naked hostility towards rich people.

I could have been like that. I grew up in very modest circumstances in north London. My parents were children during the Depression of the 1930s. My father's father was out of work for five years. My mother was born to a single parent on a council estate. It wasn't until he got to around the age of 60 that my father felt his salary was comfortable – and then depression took it from him as he had to retire early.

So you can imagine that coming to an area like this in Surrey as we did eleven years ago was potentially problematic for me. There were certainly aspects of local expectations and lifestyle that neither Debbie nor I liked then, and we still don't.

But Jesus loved the rich man, and so must I. The difference is the kind of love Jesus offered him.

For we talk so readily of 'unconditional love' and we say, 'Jesus loves us just as we are.' And while that's true so far as it goes, it's only a half-truth. Just

because Jesus loves us as we are doesn't mean he wants to leave us like this. In fact, he loves us too much to leave us as we are. And he couldn't leave the rich man in slavery to his wealth and his property.

So Jesus doesn't offer the kind of love which says, 'I love you as you are,' with the silent implication that people can stay just as they are. He offers uncompromising love where he says, 'I love you so much, but I won't negotiate how you live, this is what I require of you if you are truly to follow me.'

Now that poses a problem for us when we think about wanting to welcome people into church, but maybe John Wesley had a helpful approach to this. As you know, he was big on putting people into small groups for the sake of their spiritual growth, but what a lot of people don't realise is that he had more than one kind of small group. The one most people have heard of was the 'class', and there was only one requirement for joining a class, which was that essentially you were a spiritual enquirer.

However, if you were clearly a committed disciple of Jesus, there was another group for you, and that was a confidential group called the 'band'.

Maybe we need to maintain these distinctions today. The rich man in our story would have made it into the class but not into the band, and then he would have even left the class.

What we need to remember is this: the love of Jesus is unconditional in that it is offered before we ever loved him, but it is also uncompromising because it calls us into the lifestyle of a Christian disciple.

Thirdly and finally, we learn that *Jesus' grace is transformative*.

I'm thinking here of the conversation Jesus has with his disciples after the rich man has gone away. In the light of Jesus' standards they wonder who can possibly be saved, and Jesus replies that what is humanly impossible is nevertheless possible for God. (Verses 23-27) Then Peter talks about all the sacrifices he and the other disciples have already made in order to follow their master, and Jesus promises them a mixture of rewards and persecution in this life, but unfettered blessing in the life to come. (Verses 28-30)

Contrast all that with the weak and insipid way we talk about grace in the church today. A recent Methodist document simply defined grace as 'God's unconditional regard towards people.' Rather like the 'God loves us as we are' thinking we just considered, it's only a partial truth. Grace is not only the way

God reaches out to us and accepts us, it's the way in which he changes us and fulfills that desire of Jesus' uncompromising love to see us transformed.

You see, while discipleship requires commitment and effort from us, we all know our propensity to fail – that's behind the disciples' despairing comment, 'Who then can be saved?' But ultimately, we're drawn to discipleship by the call of Jesus, and we're enabled to be disciples by the Holy Spirit. So in the final analysis, it's the work of God doing something good in us that we don't deserve. And that's grace. God makes the impossible possible.

But not only that, says Jesus, this grace shows that discipleship is more than the costly decisions we make to follow him (although that is part of it). As the New Testament scholar James R Edwards puts it,

But to conceive of discipleship solely in terms of its costs and sacrifices is to conceive of it wrongly – as though in marrying a beautiful bride a young man would think only of what he was giving up. ... the reward of eternal life makes the sacrifices of discipleship look insignificant in comparison to the lavish blessing of God.²

God will bless the disciples of Jesus in this life, although there will still be the troubles of persecution, and he will bless again in the life of the age to come. That too is grace, along with the way grace enables and empowers us to walk the path of the disciple.

To **conclude**, let's go back to where we started. Do we all have to sell our possessions? It depends on what Jesus asks of us, because to be a disciple means putting him first and following his will for our lives, rather than simply keeping a set of religious rules.

The thing is, his love meets us where we are but also draws us on into that life of imitating Jesus. And that call is one we will fail, but that's where his grace comes in – again, meeting us where we are but transforming us and blessing us beyond description.

That, in outline, is the life of a Christian disciple.

¹ As found at <https://brettfish.wordpress.com/2015/11/20/sell-all-of-our-possessions/>

² James R Edwards, *The Gospel According To Mark*, pp 316, 317.