

Right Question, Wrong Response Mark 10:17-27

Read Mark 10:15 as background to Mark 10:17-27 and then read

Mark 10: 17. Mark wrote that this man came to the right person with the right attitude and asked the right question.

This man, whose name is never given, ran to Jesus. Jesus was on His way to a new destination, and evidently this man was concerned that He would leave before he got to talk to Him. He literally ran to catch up to Him. We have no idea why he felt Jesus could help him. Perhaps he had heard Him teach or perhaps he had simply heard reports about Him, but he hurried to the one who could honestly answer his question. It is interesting to think about the various people and books that people go to seeking spiritual guidance, but if one really wants to know what truth is, one needs to go to the revelation of God Himself, the Bible.

We call this man the Rich Young Ruler. All three of the Gospels that record this encounter described him as a man of “great wealth” while Luke adds that he as a “ruler” (Luke 18:18). This man had it all as far society was concerned. It is interesting that he was not only willing but anxious to meet with Jesus. Most of the religious leaders of that day rejected Jesus, often to the point of open hostility. This man ran to Him.

From the additional information we get from Mark’s Gospel, we know that he was a deeply religious man. In other words, he was an affluent, powerful man doing his best to live righteously but knowing that something was missing. He hoped that Jesus could give him the added spiritual direction he wanted.

His question was the right one. No question is more important to have answered than the question of how to be sure where one is going to spend eternity. Of all the issues that will concern us in life, none is more critical than getting the right answer to that question because it determines where we will be when we die.

He came with the right attitude. He “**fell on his knees before him,**” an attitude of sincere respect. He came in the right way to the right person. He addressed Him as “**Good teacher,**” Note the response of Jesus to the way He was addressed. Read Mark 10:18.

Jesus was hoping to get this young man to see the difference between what we can call “*relative*” goodness and “*ultimate*” goodness. When we think in relative terms of goodness, we compare ourselves to others. Jesus wants this man to understand that ultimately the standard of “good” is not how we compare to one another but how we compare to God who is truly good. The Jews knew this and taught that ultimately only God is good. Jesus was using this to re-direct his thinking to that ultimate standard because that is the standard God has set for fellowship with Him. It is, of course, a standard that we know we can never attain which is why we must rely on the gracious gift offered to us through Jesus.

This young man asked an almost right question. He asked “**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**” Asking about eternal life is tremendously important but, this was only “almost” right. The problem was that he wanted to know what to **do** to get eternal life. Religions are interested in what one must do but Christianity is all about what has been done already by Jesus on the Cross. We know that God’s Word says eternal life is not something we earn but that which we are given because of God’s grace. Read Ephesians 2:8-9.

Jesus answered him, “**You know the commandments:**” Then Jesus listed some of the 10 commandments that every Jew knew he should follow. The important thing to see in this list is that they all involve our social interactions with others.

Read Mark 10:20 Literally he had kept all those laws since his Bar Mitzvah. Although that may sound a little presumptuous to us who are aware that we are all sinners and there is no one who can live a perfect life, by Jewish standards he was being honest. Under the legalism of Judaism this man was right on. Read in Philippians 3:6 what Paul later said about this. This man had done everything he had been told he should do to please God. Still he knew something was missing and so he came to Jesus seeking that final act to ensure he would have eternal life.

Note that Jesus did not bring into question his belief that he has done everything right. I would have been tempted to say, “*Ok, you didn’t murder but have you hated?*” or “*Are you sure you have never told a white lie, which is really bearing false witness?*” Jesus didn’t go there. Read Jesus’ response in Mark 10:21.

Notice that Mark wrote, “**Jesus looked at him and loved him.**” This man does not come off looking good, but Jesus loved him. Jesus loves us all. We would be amazed at how many in our community we could reach with the gospel if we practiced loving them as Jesus loves them.

Jesus said, “**Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor.**” Did Jesus really mean that? That seems awfully harsh. Of course He meant it. God means everything He says in His Word. But remember, this was tailored to the man with whom He was talking. The specifics may not apply to us, but the principle does. Jesus was not suggesting that we live ascetic lives where we own nothing and have nothing. Poverty has never been a requirement of being a Christian.

What was Jesus saying to this man? Jesus was addressing two issues. This man had just said that he was keeping all of God’s requirements on how we are to relate to those around us. Jesus was saying to him, “*You say you care about those around you, now put your money, all of it, where your mouth is and give your wealth to the poor.*” It’s always a lot easier to talk about the needs of others than to actually do what we can with the resources we have.

The second issue was more serious. Jesus had addressed the last of the 10 Commandments. Here He was addressing the first Commandment that we are to have no other gods before us. God must be first in our lives. For this man wealth was really his god. His wealth was his idol. It occupied the place that belonged to God.

Read Mark 10:22. The word translated “**sad**” has several meanings from sad to angry to appalled. They all reflect the same thought. How ironic is it that this man who had everything the world thinks is important to making one happy went away knowing that his position and all his wealth really could not give him the peace he wanted. How sad it is when one seeks to gain the whole world at the expense of his soul.

He went away. This man literally walked away from the only one who could provide what he really needed. To him, his possessions were more valuable than following Jesus. He preferred the riches of this world to the riches of God’s kingdom. Jim Elliot, the missionary martyred seeking to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador, wrote in his college journal, “*He is no fool who gives up that which he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.*” This young man gave up what was truly important because he wanted to hold onto that which in the end would not last. In the eyes of the world he was wealthy but in the eyes of God he was actually bankrupt.

The discussion that follows in Mark 10 tells us that Jesus said, “**How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!**” Jesus was not putting down wealth but was taking His disciples and us back to where this whole discussion began. Re-read Mark 10:15. The only way to come to God is in utter dependence upon Him. Money, even the good use of it, cannot get us into heaven. Only God’s gracious provision available because of His grace and mercy can give us eternal life. While with our resources it is impossible to get to heaven, verse 27 reads, “**all things are possible with God.**” Eternal life is available but only when done God’s way and Jesus laid that way out for us. Read John 14:6.

What should we learn from this encounter besides the truth that God and God alone can provide salvation? It seems to me that the really critical lesson is the challenge to each of us to evaluate what we value, be it resources or activities, to be sure something has not become our idol that hinders us from putting God first in our lives.