

Christian Life Builders' Class
 Sunday School Lesson 6-28-2026

Sell All You Have . . .

Introduction:

This is the fourth lesson in our series on hard sayings of the New Testament, and this week we deal with one that would not only be expected in such a series, but almost obligatory. It's a saying found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and, as we mentioned in a previous lesson, found in the same narrative context in all three. There are slight variations in the three, but since the one written in Mark was written first and adapted by the others, it makes sense to look at it from Mark's Gospel.

The event is that of a man (described as 'rich' by Matthew, and a 'ruler' by Luke) running to Jesus, kneeling before him and asking him what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. I'm sure most, if not all of us, know the story and Jesus' answer to the question. For those of us who live in a society that equates personal worth with real estate ownership and other forms of equity, we recognize Jesus' answer as a hard saying, one which many of us hope doesn't apply to us as we work out our relationship as His disciples.

I. The question, Jesus' answer, the man's response. Mark 10:17-23

Mark is a good story teller. As he writes to a Roman audience, who are usually more concerned with action than with description, he often gets to the crux of the narrative leaving any descriptive comments for later. Without any description of the person who comes to Jesus Mark uses only the masculine form of the cardinal number "one." "One" (male) comes to Jesus. That's it. We don't know how old he is, what his role in society is, or what his status might be; nothing of the things we might be looking for.

We are given, on the other hand, a description of what he does, what he thinks of Jesus, and when it's happening in the life of Jesus and the disciples. In all three Synoptic gospels, Jesus and his disciples are on the journey to Jerusalem. It is a time when much teaching is going on between Jesus and his disciples, particularly in relationship to the character of the kingdom as opposed to current societal norms, and the cost of being a disciple as citizen of the kingdom.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What information does Mark eventually give us about this man? (Explain *ktēmata*)
2. How might that information describe his physical approach to Jesus?
3. How does the man describe Jesus, and what do you think he means by the words he uses? (Explain "good" here.)
4. With what we know so far, what seems to be the point of the man's question?

This description of this man's coming to Jesus is as counter-cultural as the word-picture of the father coming to his son in the parable of the prodigal son. This is a man with properties, and, as such, a man with status who would neither run toward nor bow before an itinerant preacher unless the sense of honor he had for him would be exceptionally high. It appears that such was the case. The wording of his question indicates more about his understanding of Jewish eschatology than it says about his status. For Jews, from the very beginning of their story, the promises of God were concentrated on keeping the land, and thus the use of the word "inherit" as one generation followed after another in the plan of God. However, from the time of the exile, or perhaps more precisely, from the time of Antiochus IV of Syria (the eventual heir of rulership over Palestine after Alexander, 2nd century B.C.), the concept of "eternal life" in Jewish eschatology went beyond land to something else, since most Jews lived outside Palestine. The word "inherit" was still used because Jews were still heirs of promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, the concept of inheritance carried with it the need for being worthy of it. Thus, the question, "What must I **do** to **inherit** . . .?"

First point of Jesus' answer: Jesus accepts the question as given, and answers with something the man must do. Second point, and more important: Jesus seems to change the concept of "eternal life" from something one acquires to a new experience in one's life.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What is the one thing that the man lacked?

2. **To apply Jesus' answer to ourselves, how are we to respond to that same lack?**

It is this question which we all must answer deeply and honestly before we can determine how any of us are to interpret Jesus' answer for ourselves. Peter's remark to Jesus, which we are about to look at, includes a response involving all of Jesus' 12 disciples.

3. There are two things about Mark's telling of this episode that we each have to take seriously. What are those two things?

II. The disciples' response. Mark 10:24-28

What is not obvious to most readers is that this is another case in which Mark seems to be creating a literary "sandwich," (the technical term is 'intercalation'). Jesus' opening response to the young man's question is to focus the use of the word 'good' on the "one and only God." All Judaism knew that only God could be described as "good." Everyone else, no matter their reputation or character was less than good. In v. 27 the whole question of how one can inherit or enter the kingdom rests solely on God himself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What do you know or suspect about Jewish culture or theology that would cause the disciples to be so shocked that Jesus says it is so difficult or even impossible for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God?

2. How do you read the comparison in v. 25?

As far back as the earliest prophets (8th century B.C.), popular Jewish culture understood that wealth was somehow proof of God’s blessings on those who were faithful to him. Several of the Proverbs were interpreted that way, and some Psalms seemed to underscore that idea as well, which may explain the laments in the Psalms that complain against what seems to be divine injustice which allows many ungodly wealthy people to be spared the same calamities that come upon the faithful poor. The relationship between faithfulness to God and prosperity has never been either automatic or reciprocal. You can have one without the other—wealth without faithfulness. For Jews, however, as much as they recognize the facts of economic and political injustice, wealth was still a sign of blessing. And where wealth wasn’t available, performance seemed to take its place. The man in our story recognized that his wealth didn’t satisfy what he understood “eternal life” to be. He knew something was missing. Thus, the question, “What must I do?” Daily labor was part of God’s blessing on Adam and Eve before sin entered the picture. Periodic failure in the exercise of that labor came as a result of the Fall. (No matter how hard you work, you just can’t get rid of weeds permanently.)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Is there anything inherently wrong with being rich that would affect one’s eternal destiny?

Is there anything good about being poor that would improve one’s worthiness of eternal life?

III. Jesus’ final word on the matter. Mark 10:28-31

Jesus has just made it clear that entering the kingdom of God is impossible for men, whether by entitlement, wealth, sacrifice, or merit. Peter’s response in this text includes the tacit question, (verbalized in one of the other gospels), which, for lack of a better way to word it, is, “What’s in it for us?” Jesus’ response here does not sound like he’s at all disappointed in the question. It appears to be a very rational one for disciples at that particular point in Jesus’ history—before his death and resurrection. Jesus presents a response in kind: listing what’s ‘in it.’ However, the answer is neither transactional, numerically exact, nor complete in terms of things gained or surrendered. I joke when I say that God responded to my giving up a house in the Camelot subdivision to go to Africa, during which time I lived in 17 other houses over 11 years, and that God only owes me 83 now. Sometimes your new brothers and sisters in Christ become closer to you than your biological family. Richard Zanner, who directed our work in Southern Africa, but was retired in Germany when we lived in Europe, became a father to me there, even though we were together rarely. And when I had the opportunity to host his grandson who visited Goma, Congo, with the family’s gift for one of our Nazarene schools there, it was like being with my own nephew. Beyond family and friends, following Jesus may create a situation of giving up a career or a favorite pastime, but with a result of creating all new, unimagined opportunities. The benefits of relinquishing your hold on people and things, or cutting off their hold on you, may be their return to you in unimaginable ways, providing you don’t allow their previous holds to be restored. Persecution will arise along with these benefits, but in the age to come, the eternal life we experience here in this time will be experienced in its full.

Mark closes this teaching moment between Jesus and his disciples with what Tom Phillips calls, “one of His significant reversals”: “Many who are first will be last, and the last first.” This is another of those hard sayings, because we’re not sure what Jesus means by it. In our culture, when we hear “first” and “last,” we think chronologically. If we apply that sense of those two words to this saying, we get something really hard to decipher. However, if we consider the culture of the 1st century and their concentration on status in society and the amount of honor each family has, “first” and “last” take on a completely different meaning, such that those persons the culture sees as having first place may not have that place in God’s kingdom. So, we have Onesimus, the slave of a wealthy layman from a backwater church in the city of Colossae, who becomes the bishop over the churches in Ephesus and all the surrounding area including the one that meets in his master’s house as well as all the churches listed in the book of Revelation. And then, we have Paul, the top student in his class in the Jewish seminary in Jerusalem, who sees himself as the least of all the apostles because of his history of persecuting the church. We might place him on a different level of hierarchy in the church, but he certainly didn’t.

On the other hand, many commentaries want to link this verse to what we see previously in chapter 9 of Mark, where some of the disciples were arguing among themselves as to which was the most important among the 12, and on what basis. On that occasion, Jesus said “If any man would be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” (Mark 9:35). In both of these contexts in Mark, “first” and “last” seem to hold a sense of position rather than timing.

Conclusion:

In a world where wealth is venerated, Jesus exposes its spiritual danger. In a culture where effort and sacrifice are expected, Jesus reveals their limits. What is impossible for humans—earning, keeping, or deserving salvation—is made possible by God alone. This passage calls us not to despair of grace, but to abandon our illusions of self-sufficiency, and to follow the One who alone gives eternal life.

Tom Phillips, *IBL, Summer 2026*, Kansas City: Foundry, 2026, p. 19