

Living Counter-Cultural: Being First

Matthew 19:16-30

I. Living counter-cultural requires a right heart; 19:16-22.

¹⁶ Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" ¹⁷ "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." ¹⁸ "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, " 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, ¹⁹ honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.' " ²⁰ "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" ²¹ Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

This young man addresses Jesus with a title of respect, “teacher”, that acknowledges Jesus’ mastery of Scripture. This young man seems to believe that there is something lacking in obeying the law to gain eternal life. Jesus gets the young man to focus on God alone as Good, to whom he must come to gain eternal life.

What the man calls "eternal life," Jesus calls the "kingdom", and the disciples call being "saved". Jesus takes the young man back to obeying the law as the expression of belief in the truly good being. This is not to earn life eternal, rather, it is humbly to obey the law in faith of God’s goodness.

The young man responds to Jesus' directive to obey the commandments by asking, "Which ones?" Jesus replies by giving a representative listing of the law, including five of the commandments in the second part of the Ten Commandments and the second of the two greatest commandments. With confidence, the young man declares that he has kept them all.

But obedience to the law still does not satisfy this young man. He senses that he still lacks something. Jesus takes the young man to his values and challenges him to see what his most cherished value is - the ruling god of his life. Without the truly good God ruling him, he will continue to feel he is missing something.

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The young man has almost certainly given to the poor in the past, because the

giving of alms was one of the mainstays of devotion within Judaism. Giving to the poor can be done out of the abundance that a person has. It can give a person an even greater sense of power and personal pride.

Jesus calls him to exchange the god of wealth for following Him as the one true God. He will continue to lack until he becomes powerless, defenseless, and needing his Father's influence.

The young man knows that Jesus has correctly identified what is lacking in his life. He knows what issues are at stake. His many possessions have captivated his heart, and he cannot exchange this god for Jesus. So, he goes away with great distress, knowing deep in his heart that his decision has eternal consequences. He knew all along what he was lacking for eternal life, and when he is offered it by Jesus, he rejects the invitation to life.

The young man's turning away is tragic. It becomes a powerful illustration even in our own lives of the way we need to examine what is ruling our lives. Even Christians can misplace their allegiance, so each person must be honest with himself or herself to know what the treasure of the heart is.

Do you sense something is missing from your life? Many want their lives to change and the world to change but are unwilling to sacrifice anything personal for it to happen. Are you satisfied with your walk with Christ? Do you ever feel you're not doing enough? Maybe you don't need to do more but to yield more.

Each of us faces the daily challenge in our growth as His disciples. Jesus still calls us to be honest about what rules our lives. The joys, securities, and comforts these pursuits temporarily offer may not appear to be bad, but they are when the real motive is serving self.

What rules your life? Whatever it is, it is not worth your eternal life, salvation, and the kingdom of God. Following Jesus is to be an all-in event, not something to add to your life. Without the truly good God ruling you, you will continue to feel you are missing something.

II. Living counter-cultural requires being last; 19:23-30.

²³ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" ²⁶ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." ²⁷ Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.

This man illustrates a basic principle of this life--wealth is addictive. It provides most of the counterfeits that fool a person into thinking he or she does not need God. The rich person is self-sufficient, having the resources to be powerful, to protect oneself from deprivation and hardship, and to make of oneself whatever one wants.

To illustrate the difficulty of a rich person entering the kingdom of God, Jesus draws on an analogy using a camel, the largest land animal in Palestine, and the eye of a needle, the smallest aperture found in the home. He wants to shock the crowd into seeing that even the absurdly impossible is possible with God.

The disciples are shocked at Jesus' statement about the difficulty of wealthy people entering the kingdom of God, because wealth was equated with the blessing of divine favor. If those who seemingly are the most blessed of God cannot be saved, then who can be?

Once Jesus has made this dramatic statement, Peter steps forward once again as a spokesman for the disciples: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" Peter rightly understands that the focus is not solely on the rich person but on all people, because it provides a pattern for anyone. He and the others have left all to follow Jesus, but Peter focuses on rewards.

His question reveals a wrong motive. He is driven by serving Jesus and the kingdom of heaven for the primary purpose of receiving rewards and gaining personal prominence. Jesus acknowledges Peter's sacrifice and does say that he will be rewarded, but this is the least noble of motivations for a disciple.

Although there will be a specific reward for the Twelve, there will also be a reward for all who become disciples of Jesus: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my

sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." In distinction from the rich young man who has turned away, any who examine themselves and give up their own little gods to follow Jesus in discipleship, (whether that little god is family or possessions or things), will receive the reward of the full realization of their inheritance of eternal life. Those who serve for the purpose of gaining rewards will be last, but those who serve for the motivation of obeying Jesus' summons will be first.

What must be dethroned that is keeping us from experiencing freedom and fullness of life? Jesus calls us to come and follow Him, so that He can save us from our old way of life and offer us a new way. We must surrender that which governs us and accept a new ruler.

Being a disciple of Jesus is for those who have counted the cost and want real life, eternal life, received from a Savior who came to earth to seek and to save us. He lovingly and persistently transforms us into His image. You can't grow as a disciple and not give up anything. We need to stop thinking "Jesus wouldn't or isn't asking that of us."