

“TOUGH STUFF: III - ALL OF IT?”

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Mark 10:17-31

I begin my sermon today with a confession. Once I bought something off of an infomercial! Have you ever done that? I hate those things - those infernal infomercials. People spending half an hour trying to get you to buy things like little sandwich grills on which you can make all sorts of creative things in a snap - wonderful sandwiches, delicious deserts, fluffy omelettes - or magical, mysterious stain removers that can take even the toughest stains out of the most delicate fabrics! Please

But yes, I succumbed one night. I was flipping the channels and as I did, I came upon an infomercial for the “One Second Needle.” Anybody heard of that? It’s a plain old sewing needle - but ah, it’s an extra special sewing needle, because you don’t have to struggle to thread the needle. There’s a special little hook in it so all you have to do is draw the thread up the side of the needle, and voila! It goes right up into the eye of the needle, and you’re good to go!!!

Well, that was for me! The last time these 56 year old eyes tried to thread a needle I finally gave up, and just used a safety pin to fix the tear. (Of course, that was before my recent purchase of several pair of drugstore reading glasses!) Ah, the joys of growing older!

So, I’m a happy camper now that I have my One Second Needle - I can repair things at will - and just so you know, I got a bonus One Second Needle with my order because I called within the next half hour!!

Why all this talk about needles? Well, did you hear that Jesus talked about a needle in this morning’s Gospel lesson, and what He said was pretty unsettling. Listen again to His words: “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.” (Mark 10:25)

Now, I don’t know about you, but that verse has always made me squirm. What does it mean? Does it mean that we’re not supposed to have any wealth? Does it mean that we’re supposed to give away everything we have? Is Jesus just speaking to rich people?

Well, before you go there, let me remind you of something I told you about a number of years ago. Most of us here in this church are rich compared to everyone

else in the world. This week, while preparing this sermon, I went again to the website globalrich.com, and typed in my income, and it told me where I am in terms of the richest people in the world. I am among the .94% richest people in the world. That's the top 1% of people in the entire world!

So what are we to make of what Jesus said? Well, let's revisit the lesson and explore it some more. One day, a young man came up to Jesus, knelt before him, and asked him a question. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus talked to him about keeping the commandments, and the young man assured him that he had been keeping them all for a long time.

The scripture says that Jesus then, looking at him with love, 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." And then the scripture says that the young man was shocked, and went away grieving, because he had so many possessions - and apparently, he couldn't imagine giving them up.

It's a sad story. The story of two heartbroken men. Jesus, heartbroken, because He loved this young man, and wanted him to know what life could really be like, unencumbered by possessions, stuff, wealth, fully committed to a life of faithful discipleship. And the other the young man - heartbroken, because he really wanted to follow Jesus, but just couldn't let go of everything else. He just wasn't ready to fully commit - so he turned and walked away.

A pastor named James Moore pastors a church in Texas whose services are broadcast on the local television station. One day he pulled into a gas station to get some gas, and while he was standing there filling up his car, a young man got out of another car near him, and recognized him. He went up to Pastor Moore and told him that he really enjoyed watching his church service on television. Pastor Moore thanked him and then invited him to join them in person. He assured him he would be welcomed with open arms. The young man responded that he was not ready just yet to make that kind of commitment. He told the pastor that he was still "enjoying life" and having a great time sowing his wild oats. He assured him that he did believe in God, and that maybe one day, when he got older, he might come and get involved in the church. He just wasn't ready to fully commit - and he too turned and walked away. (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is on It*, "Celebrating God's Key to Real Life," p. 56)

Both of those young men's stories show so clearly how we let things get in our way of completely following Jesus - whether it be our money, our possessions, our careers, our hobbies - whatever. For the first young man, the one in the Gospel lesson, it was his stuff, his wealth. For the second, the one who met Pastor Moore, it was his "wild-oat sowing." For you and I - well, only we can name those things.

Whatever they are, Jesus says, whatever it is that has claimed your heart, that's what you need to give up to follow me. Or perhaps I would better put it this way: that's what you need to give over to follow Jesus.

I feel very sad for the young man in the Biblical story, for he didn't know what he was walking away from, and there were some other things he didn't seem to know either.

Like, for one, you matter, and not your stuff. Jesus loved that young man more than his stuff. Jesus didn't care a whit about his stuff - his wealth, his possessions, his stature, any of that. Jesus cared about him. Jesus loved him. And oh, how often all of us make that mistake. It's not about what we have, it's never about what we have, when it comes to God, it's always about us. We matter, not our stuff. That young man didn't get that. He didn't get that Jesus loved him so much, that it broke Jesus' heart when he turned away. He didn't get that Jesus loved him just because of who he was, not because of what he had, and that Jesus wouldn't love him any more or any less if he was dirt poor, and on the lowest rungs of society. He thought that his resume, his portfolio defined him, and he was sadly mistaken. He didn't get how much he mattered, how much he was loved.

Do you? Do you know how much God loves you, and that it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, in a huge house on a big lot or in a homeless shelter, making six figures or drawing unemployment? God loves you, period, just because.

Something else the young man didn't realize, I think, was about all of his stuff - his wealth, his possessions, his position. I don't think he realized that all of that is not about what it can do for you, it's about what you can do with it. I think that's the rub of this whole lesson. Jesus is saying that you have been given all that you have as gifts from God, and they are blessings to be used by you for the work of God. That's what I meant about "giving over" our wealth to follow Jesus.

We don't have what we have just to make ourselves more comfortable. We have what we have to use it for the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted that young man to know the joy of using what he had been given to help someone else. He wanted that young man to stop focusing on himself, but focus on others. He wanted him to know the joy of sharing out of his abundance with those in need. He wanted him to realize that even when he gave of what he had, there would still be enough. You can't feel that, when you're got your hands clenched so tightly around your own stuff.

Tony Campolo tells about the time that he was on a mission in Haiti and he took his teenage son Bart along with him. One day they were walking down the street, and as they were, they were continuously followed by young children hounding them every step of the way, begging for pennies. Worldly Tony whispered to his son, "Bart, don't give them anything! If you do, they won't let up

until they've got every dime we have." Bart looked up at his dad quizzically and said, "So?"

(Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 99)

Even at that young age, Bart got it. He got the joy of giving everything for the kingdom of God. He understood that it was not all about him, something the young man in the gospel story never got.

He also never got that what Jesus really wanted was his heart. It really wasn't a matter of his money, or his possessions, or his status. It was that all those things were barriers to his heart - giving his heart fully to Jesus. All of that other stuff could be used for good, if his heart was in the right place. But he didn't get that, he thought it was about his stuff - so he turned and walked away.

You know, I think he really was heartbroken because he was trying to be a good person. He was trying, but he couldn't go the whole way. He couldn't see the possibilities, he could only see the great sacrifice that he thought was being asked of him. He couldn't see that in responding yes to Jesus, he would experience life in a whole new way - a rich life, a full life, an abundant life, a deeply satisfying life. He couldn't see that by doing what Jesus asked of him, taking his focus off of his stuff, he would discover the real meaning of life, the real joy of life. He couldn't see that the way he was going would only eventually lead to emptiness.

The late psychologist Leo Buscaglia once told about a student of his who came to him one day feeling very unsettled about his life. The student's name was Joel, and he was absolutely miserable. He felt like he was useless and worthless, that there was no joy in his life. He was becoming depressed, and so he came to Leo, his favorite professor, to talk. He said, "There's not one thing in my life that is worthwhile."

Buscaglia said, "Stand up. We're going to make a visit." And he took Joel over to a convalescent hospital near the campus. Inside, there were people sitting in wheelchairs all along the hallways, and people in beds in all the rooms, and Joel looked around and asked Leo, "What are we doing here? I don't know anything about gerontology."

Leo said, "Good. Now see that woman over there. Go talk to her. Just say hello." Well, tentatively, Joel went over to the woman and said "hello," and she looked at him kind of suspiciously. "Are you a relative?" she asked. "No," he said. "Good," she replied. "Sit down."

So he sat down and they began to talk. And they talked and they talked and they talked. They told each other their stories, and where they were from, and they just talked and talked. It seems that no one had talked - and really listened -

to either one of them in a long time.

Well, Joel started going to that center about once a week. He visited a lot of the residents, and the staff started calling the day he visited “Joel’s Day.”

Leo says that one of the greatest days in his teaching career was when he was walking across the campus one Saturday afternoon, and there was Joel, like the Pied Piper, with thirty older adults stretched out behind him. He was taking them to the coliseum to see a football game.

(James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Name is On It*, p. 63)

You see, Leo got Joel to see what Jesus was trying to get that young man to understand. It’s not about your stuff, it’s about using what you have for the kingdom of God. Whether it’s riches, or possessions, or position, or whatever - it’s using who you are and what you have for the work of the Lord. That’s what Jesus wants of us, that’s what He demands of us, that’s the life He invites us to live - and it is a life that is indeed - rich, full and abundant.

So as I finish today, I want to ask you a few questions? How did you feel when you heard this Gospel lesson today? If it made you comfortable, ask yourself why. Are you where that young man was, not fully committed to Jesus Christ? Are you afraid you’re too focused on yourself, too tied up in your stuff?

If you are, turn to Jesus, not away from him, as that young man sadly did. Turn to Him, and ask Him to guide you where you need to go. To guide you to places to use what you have been given in His service. To give you what you need to give all that you are and all that you have to Him.

There’s an old African story about a man who was being led through the jungle by a guide. They went down well-trodden paths in the bush for a long time, but then the paths began to disappear and the traveler got scared. “Are you sure you know where you’re going?” he asked the guide. “You don’t have a map, a compass, or anything, and there is no path!” The guide answered, “My friend, in this jungle, I am the path, just stay close and follow me.” (Ibid, p. 94)

Dear friends, in this jungle of a world that is our’s, in this jungle of life, Jesus is the path. Stay close, and follow Him - fully, with all your heart, using all that you have been given in anyway and all ways that you can. May it be so.

Amen.