



YEAR 1—The God of Life: A Story of God's Redeeming Shalom

Module 4—Coming Alive by Being Human: Jesus Stories on What it Means to Be Human and Fully Alive

Lesson 2—Mark 10:17-31

BIBLICAL REFLECTION

(A theological and biblical reflection on today's Scripture passage.)

GOD'S STORY

“Then who has any chance at all?’ the disciples asked” (Mark 10:26, *The Message*). The disciples likely give voice to many of our thoughts when we read this passage. Jesus instructs the rich young man to sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and then come follow him. Jesus’ invitation to discipleship is immensely demanding. Indeed, who of us has any chance at all? This might be the very question we need to ask in considering this passage as God’s story.

Our first tendency when we read a story like this is to think immediately of what we must do in order to get in on God’s offer of life, or salvation. This passage imbues a different posture toward Jesus than this. By instructing the man to go back and sell everything he has acquired in life and give the money to the poor, Jesus suggests the way to salvation is not through our effort, but rather through complete devotion to God, evidenced by a willingness to do what Jesus asks and follow him. God is the one at work bringing about life for us, inviting us to follow Jesus and discover the fullness of life only he can provide for us. This is God’s story because in it we discover the call to follow Jesus is difficult, costing us everything if we truly come to follow. God acts first in calling us, and our obedient response evidences an understanding that God’s action precedes our own. This is what makes this passage so demanding, yet fulfilling at the same time.

Simply put, discipleship in the way of Jesus is challenging, demanding and on our own seemingly impossible. Yet God in Jesus Christ is at work bringing about our salvation, making the apparently impossible not only possible, but real in our lives. The fullness of life that we experience in following Jesus is not first of all our accomplishment. It is the gift of God’s grace remaking us into those able to live into the remarkably challenging and demanding way of life with Jesus as our guide. While we often focus on our responsiveness in following Jesus, this story reminds us that the life of discipleship, through which we live more fully into the life God intends for us, is first the work of God’s restoration of our lives from sin that leads to death.

OUR STORY

Even if we aren’t rich like the man in this story is, we can likely identify with him. In response to Jesus’ request that he sell everything he has, how many of us wouldn’t hang our head in the same way? He was holding on tight to the many things that he had acquired throughout the course of his life and not about to let them go. His very identity was wrapped up in what he had acquired. To give up his stuff would mean to let go of what he had worked so hard to forge for himself. He was a self-made man, and Jesus was asking him to let go of that image of himself and allow Jesus to tell him who he truly was, inviting him to experience his true identity in discipleship to Jesus. For some people that’s simply asking too much. Perhaps it is even for us.

Our identity is vitally important to us. We need to have a sense of who we are in order to truly flourish in our lives. The trouble for so many of us is that our self-made sense of identity is often fleeting. Our attempts at

defining ourselves tend to disappoint. We grasp tightly to images of ourselves that are simply untrue, looking for the fullness of life in acquisition of stuff, or in our jobs, or in achievements. Our attempt to define ourselves can become an endless cycle of trying harder and harder to be who we think we need to be in order to truly live. This even happens in our Christian lives as we list off our religious accomplishments in order to establish our identity as followers of Jesus. Yet this passage calls us to something much more difficult, and yet much more freeing. Jesus invites us to become who we truly are not by working harder, but by letting go of ourselves for his sake.

Our attempt to define ourselves is born from a desire to experience the fullness of life. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he calls us into the fullness of life that we so desire and yearn for. This is what he means towards the end of this passage when he suggests that everything that Jesus' followers give up in following him, they will receive in full. Of course, Jesus also indicates that his followers will also experience trials in following him. The way of Jesus is not easy. The trials of Jesus led him to the cross, and we can expect that when we give everything we have for Jesus, even though we experience the fullness of life God intends for us, it may be accompanied by trials. Yet from these trials God has brought about life in Jesus Christ, and so even when we find ourselves in last place, on the outside looking in, this is the way that leads to life with God in Jesus Christ.

OTHERS' STORY

Our society is described as one of the most affluent in the history of the world, and yet we are one of the most lonely, isolated and overall sad societies that has ever existed as well. Our culture has adopted a script that suggests the way to life is found the accumulation of stuff, and that our very identity is rooted in what it is that we can buy (consumerism). Celebrities fill our TV screens as we want to know about the glamorous life they live, hoping for just a piece of the apparently full life they lead. Then it all comes crashing down and we realize the emptiness even there. Where is the fullness of life held out to others in Jesus Christ being made real?

This is where this story has to become the calling of a community of people intent on practicing the wholeness of life as followers of Jesus. This is the purpose of the church. Our calling as the church is to live among others as a community that bears witness to our truly human identity shown to us in Jesus Christ. We live into God's life-giving mission when we organize our lives together for the sake of inviting people into a way of life that places wholeness and fellowship with God at the center. In other words, the church needs to be a community that defines richness and wealth in a different way so that others may discover the life God intends for them.

God intends for us to be rich in relationships. Other people's greatest need is to discover life with Jesus and they discover that as they live life in and among others who see not the accumulation of stuff as the way to become truly human, but in giving ourselves to each other in deep friendship. The life that we leave behind by giving up everything to follow Jesus is given back to us as we enter the lives of others and discover the richness of life with them. Thus when trials come—as they surely will—we are sustained in life by those with whom we are privileged to walk the way of Jesus. Shaping our lives with others in this way becomes a witness to others that true life is found in the company of Jesus. Thus our calling among others is to display and radiate the fullness of true life with Jesus in the richness of relationships we have with one another. In this we invite them to leave everything else that preoccupies them and come follow Jesus into true life with us.

THE WORLD'S STORY

Certainly this story is about God insofar as it reveals that discipleship begins with God calling us, and not our own effort. It is also about us because we are so prone to want to define ourselves when our truest sense of self is given to us by Jesus as we follow him. Surely others find their place in this story as they are invited to discover true riches of relationship with Jesus Christ and his community. All of these deeper readings of the passage are faithful to it, but we can't overlook a very surface level reading. The man who comes to Jesus is rich. Jesus calls him to follow by selling everything he owns and giving it to the poor. Is there anything in that direct call that we must listen to?

Many corners of the world are impoverished. People all around the world live in squalor, searching every day for something to eat. Children are orphaned daily, some fortunately find their way to orphanages, others end up on the street. Even in our affluent country there are people whose lives are ravaged by poverty. This is the world's story because when Jesus calls us to be his followers, he is inviting us to leave everything and find our place with him among them.

The great reversal at the end of this passage—the first shall be last, the last first—is an indication that the people among whom Jesus' followers were counted tend to be like the poor, outcast and left out. Finding our place among the poor of the world might be the way in which we discover the trials that Jesus says are sure to come on account of following him. This means that perhaps what we are called to do to be in solidarity with the poor in our world is to simplify our lives. In simplifying our lives, maybe we will create more time in order to not simply look for ways to just give our money, but actually enter into the lives of those in our world affected by poverty. In the gift of relationship with them, we may discover the richness of life Jesus talked about his followers living into even after letting go of everything they had.

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