

What Must I Do?

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Mark 10: 17-31

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Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Mark 10: 17-31

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and 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.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

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Could you do that? Would you do that? Could you take everything that you own, sell it, and give the money to the poor so that your treasure would be in heaven?

Can you imagine selling your car and then giving thousands of dollars to Smith Church. Family Promise, the food pantry or the charity of your choice, and then walking everywhere that you need to go? Would you let go of your home, your clothing, your furniture, your appliances, and all the possessions that bring you joy, are a part of your daily life, and make your life easier?

Jesus invited a rich man to do this very thing to ‘inherit’ eternal life, and he walked away in shock and grief as he could not even imagine, even consider, letting go of his material pleasures and needs all for the good of others. He chose to go away sorrowful and holding onto his ways rather than the ways of Jesus, the ways of God. The disciples too were perplexed and astounded, wondering how anyone could possibly enter the kingdom of God.

In time they will all understand that eternal life is not something to be bought, to be inherited; it must be something given by Jesus, given by God, but it is a different lesson that Jesus is teaching, is emphasizing, on this particular day.

The rich man had asked, “what must I do?” for eternal life and to be a follower of Jesus, and the disciples also thought that same question as they recounted all that they had left behind to follow him—home, family and fields—and now fear even all that may not be enough. Yet, ‘what must I do?’ is not the right nor real question for them, or for us. The question Jesus was encouraging to be asked was “*how* must I do?” Jesus was encouraging the man to look with understanding, with compassion, with love, on those in need. The man had followed the commandments--the commandments that ordered human life and living--and he wanted to follow Jesus, but he did not have a depth of empathy that compassionately understood the needs, the plight, of others. In asking him to sell everything, Jesus was not asking in a literal sense--- Jewish law allowed only up to 1/5 to be given away in order that the giver did not in turn become a burden to society—but was asking him to see, to feel, what it would be like to not have the possessions, what it would be like to be in need of a bed, a pillow, a home, enough clothing, enough food. What would it be like to look down at your own naked feet on a dusty road knowing that you could not afford a pair of sandals? What would it be like to walk a few miles to work every day in all kinds of weather because you could not afford a car? As Karoline Lewis noted, “Riches seem to steer our glance inward, to stoke our individuality, to set our sights on our own abundance with nary a thought about securing someone else’s.” What we own can possess us so that our attention goes to their care rather than to connections, relationships, with others.

On this day’s encounter with a rich man on a journey, Jesus the teacher, is offering a lesson on compassion. Like all great teachers, Jesus showed him where to look, but did not tell him what to see. The man whose vision was limited by an imagined experience of letting go that he did not want to see, missed where Jesus had encouraged him to look. The wealthy man on a journey missed it. On our journey, do we miss it too?

Jesus, looked at him, loved him and 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.” The man—and perhaps us too—heard Jesus speak of what was owned, not what was missing.

Jesus, looked at him, looks at us, loved him, loves us and said, “You lack one thing.” Jesus was not saying *what* must be done, but *how* it is to be done. ‘What must I do’ is more ‘how it is to be done’. It is an attitude of faith, of discipleship, that offers compassion and empathy. By quoting the commandments that deal with human relations, Jesus teaches the man that doing the will of God has everything to do with how people treat each other. To do anything less is to not

follow Jesus, or in the words of the prophet Amos, “turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground,” as our worship and faith would then come to just be lip service, hollow and empty. Faith must be love from the heart, not just knowledge in the head.

Sharing, and sharing generously, is indeed a cornerstone of faithful living, yet Jesus calls followers to do so from the heart, with an empathetic love and understanding of the plight of others. Even if the man sold everything he owned and gave away all the money he received but did not come to see, understand and have compassion on those who would benefit, he has not followed Jesus. If any of us sold our possessions and then gave thousands of dollars to Smith Church, Family Promise, the food pantry or the charity of our choice, but did not come to see, understand and have compassion on those who would benefit, we would not be following Jesus. Can he, can we, allow ourselves to imagine the experience of having nothing, absolutely nothing?

What he lacked, what we can lack, is the ability to see beyond the fleeting, tangible, things of now and into an ongoing, enduring, heart-to-heart relationship with Jesus in which we are rich with the promises of God.

This man’s one small conversation with Jesus holds the Gospel message: If you want to follow me, if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. Deny himself. Take up a cross. Die to yourself by dying to the pursuits and pleasures and possessions of this world and follow me wherever, however I lead. Die to yourself and be generous and gracious with your lives. This is the meaning of being a follower of Jesus since through him we have passed through the eye of the needle. As people of faith, as disciples of Jesus, as stewards of all that God has given us, we can use all that we have in service to our neighbor and in our care for the world.

Jesus loved this man so much that he beckoned him to lose his life in order that he would find his life. Jesus loves us so much that he beckons us to lose our lives in order that we would find our lives.

Like the Rainbow Fish*, we reflect our truest, best self when we share with a generous heart, when we let go of what we thought mattered, when we lose our lives in order that we would find our lives. Amen.

*Pfister, Marcus. *The Rainbow Fish*. Translated by J. Alison James, NorthSouth Books, NY, 1992