

St. Barnabas, Florissant  
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## SOMETHING'S MISSING

The story of Jesus' encounter with the pious, rich young man has always been one of my favorite gospel stories. It has some interesting features that make it different. First of all, most of the scribes and Pharisees who ask Jesus questions, in my mind at any rate, are older men. This is a *young* man. Most of Jesus' questioners are trying to trap him; this young man, on the other hand, sensed that something very important was missing in his religious life and that this Jesus just might have the answer. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." Jesus tests him by telling him that he already knows God's commandments are. We know that the young man was very pious and very earnest about his spiritual life, because he replied that he had kept *all* of God's commandments since his childhood. It is remarkable that he is even there. Most Jews would have said that this young fellow was truly a righteous man and that he was on the right path.

Jesus could tell that this man was not trying to trick him. He was genuinely anxious about something very important missing in his relationship with God, and that he had faith in Jesus' ability to reveal to him whatever more he needed to do to fulfill God's expectations of him.

The rich young man's answers moved Jesus deeply. Our text says that Jesus *loved him*. It is obvious that Jesus wanted him to join him. But, he knew something that the young man did not know: that there was a tremendous barrier that separated the two of them.

So, Jesus said, "Well, then, if you want to do more, go and sell all that you have and give it to the poor, and then come and follow me." Jesus knew how difficult it would be for him to lay down his wealth and follow Jesus' poor little band of followers. And, Jesus was right—he couldn't do it, and went away very sad.

In the discussion that followed Jesus remarked that it is very difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven, as

difficult as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. The disciples were amazed. How, then, can anyone be saved? Some explanation is needed here. Middle Eastern towns had gates that were closed at dark so that animals and intruders couldn't get in. That included noisy, smelly camels, who had to stay outside. Yet, the owners of the camels needed access to the town if they arrived late. So, many towns had a small, narrow door next to the big ones, through which a human could duck down and go through. A camel could get through only by crawling, something camels are unwilling to do. The rich are like camels—too proud to crawl through whatever opening leads into God's kingdom. Perhaps, another image might be helpful. The rich man is like a man with much baggage, which will not go through the small door and who is not willing to leave it behind in order to enter the city.

Although there have been many Christians down through the ages—St. Francis for example—who concluded that adopting a life of poverty is necessary to being a follower of Jesus, that is not really the point being made in this gospel story. It is not wealth per in and of itself that tripped up the young man, but rather his attachment to it. Jesus actually had followers who were wealthy, and helped finance the movement. Jesus simply knew that the young man would not be able to join Jesus' little band of intimate followers if he could not lay aside his possessions. They were the baggage that would not let him enter the city—the kingdom of heaven in this case.

In reading any story like this, it is always helpful to ask if it has any obvious application to our own situations. Most of us are not young or rich, and many are not men. But, we all have our baggage—all our possessions, our things and even our activities, that tie us down and potentially can stand between us and God.

I teach a class on the history of Christian spirituality at Eden Seminary, and when we did our chapter on St. Francis, we talked about this whole issue of holy poverty. I asked them to think about what possessions they have (not family or pets, but things and routines) that they would find very difficult to part with if God called them to do something very different. A number of them said cell phones and computers—what they need to communicate quickly with their friends and family. What would life be like

without email or instant messaging or twittering or you tubing or face booking! Others focused on activities like running or biking or walking or reading the morning paper over a cup of coffee or watching a favorite tv show. I'm a news junkie, so being separated from the news I read on the internet or on tv or in the newspapers (especially *The New York Times*) is really tough. I had a taste of that this summer during the three weeks I was in a remote part of Africa with very limited internet access. It was tough, and I was really glad to be reconnected with the news when I got home. Yet, it did teach me something. I really was not really much the worse off. The news I read upon return sounded an awful lot like the news I had left behind three weeks earlier. Little of significance had changed. Maybe I spend too much time reading the news just like others spend too much time watching mindless tv shows or facebooking or texting. Maybe we all would be better off if we could lay all of that aside at least for a little bit to spend quality time with family and friends, at church and in the community helping others. That would be a positive response to Jesus' invitation to follow him. I say this knowing how addictive our possessions and activities have become, and how often we turn away sadly (or maybe not even so sadly).

One time in every year we are especially invited by Jesus to follow him more closely is stewardship time. We are challenged to believe that all we have comes from God and that He asks us in return as good stewards to save a part of our time, talent, and treasure for His special use in and through the Church. The traditional, biblical portion is the tithe or a tenth. Everyone's circumstances are different, but the challenge is the same: to let go of our things and let God direct us in the use of them. Many years ago when Mary Jane and I had little children and not much money we decided to put our money where our mouths were—to work up to tithing. It took a few years to accomplish, but after that we've just followed the principle of first fruits—we give God the top tenth. The amazing thing is that we've always had enough. Sometimes that enough has been skimpier than other times (this past year has been one of those times), but to be honest we are no worse the wear for living more simply in the past year. We were especially concerned about our significant pledge to our parish's building fund made before the market

crash. But, money we hadn't counted on showed up in just the right amount to pay for the pledge. I've been convinced over and over again—that when we are faithful to God's plan for us, life goes a whole lot better and that we have been greatly blessed by sticking to our commitment to God many years ago. I commend it to you. There is a real joy that comes from freely giving to God from the abundance that God has given us in the first place. Good stewardship, I'm convinced, is the path to a deeper relationship with God and the joy and peace that that brings. Is that not what life in God's kingdom is all about?! AMEN.