



**"What Must I Do?"**  
**Scripture – Mark 10:17-31**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, October 10, 2021**

In one of the devastating California wildfires, thousands barely escaped when the winds whipped up flames and propelled them at incredible speeds. In one family, the daughter woke in the middle of the night because she caught a whiff of smoke. She dashed into her parents' bedroom and jarred them awake. They peered out their back windows and were horrified at the sight of a raging fire being blown up the hill toward their house.

It was a vision of hell that could induce paralysis, but their adrenaline kicked in and they rushed through their house. They roused all of their children and grabbed a handful of things. They bolted out the front door, hopped into their car and sped off, barely escaping with their lives. On the day they were able to return to their house nothing was there. Everything they owned had been incinerated. But they were alive. And they had each other. In moments like this, people discover that their abundance of possessions is not what is genuinely important.<sup>1</sup>

Reporters from *Time* magazine went to the football stadium where people had been directed immediately after fleeing the fires. They talked to people who had only a handful of minutes to escape and asked what they had grabbed. A little boy named Andrew said he saved his pillow. A woman grabbed two photographs and a Dr. Seuss book. A young man saved his saxophone. A woman named Michelle grabbed her high school diploma.<sup>2</sup>

If you had a minute to evacuate your home, what would you take with you?

In the consumerist culture in which we live, we are bombarded with pop-up ads suggesting that our life is incomplete without the latest fashion wear, luxury vehicle, or hip technological gadget. Sometimes it takes a shock to remind us that possessions are not what make our lives meaningful and satisfying.

Today's text reminds us of one of Jesus' essential teachings: Virtue is not enough. How we handle our wealth is critical.

A man ran up to Jesus and said: "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied by rattling off several of 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."

In our day, "eternal life" has been narrowed to mean life after death. However, in the first century, it meant not only a future life, but a rich, abundant life *now*. The man was asking, "What must I do to unearth a beautiful existence today and forever?"

I have generally pictured this man as full of himself. He has followed God's law scrupulously and he inflates his ego by attracting the admiration of others for his degree of faithfulness. I have often thought that his question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" was disingenuous. He was not seeking an answer, but rather a platform from which he could boast to Jesus and to all those within earshot that he lives a more principled and honorable life than most.

However, over the past few days as I wrestled with this text, I kept questioning that premise. Rather than being arrogant, perhaps he was troubled; rumblings within him produced uneasiness in his soul.

The text indicates that the man knelt before Jesus. That shows he had some degree of humility. When Jesus named the importance of keeping the commandments, rather than jumping to his feet, throwing out his chest, and triumphantly declaring that he had kept every single one, he might have been hanging his head. Perhaps when he said, "Teacher, I have kept all of these since my youth" it was in the sense of: I have obeyed the commandments, but I still hunger and thirst for something deeper. What am I missing, Jesus?"

Whether the man was arrogant or sincere, we know that the response of Jesus was shattering. Relying on hyperbole to push us out of our ruts, he says "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible says "When the man heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." The Message version says, "The man's face clouded over. This was the last thing he expected to hear, and he walked off with a heavy heart (because) he was holding on tight to a lot of things, and not about to let go."

Perhaps the man could not face the fact that his wealth had weakened him. It had drained him of his courage to use some of his abundance for the benefit of others. Jesus offered him the door to freedom, but the security of riches was too seductive. Jesus urged him to take a risk for God's kingdom, but the man had grown too accustomed to playing it safe. He was mired in an unquestioned assumption that material possessions were the proof that he was a success. He was enslaved to the unexamined idea that his wealth was the source of joy. He was locked into a mindset that the purpose of life is to gain and preserve, not to surrender and sacrifice. His self-esteem was so wrapped up in his wealth that he believed selling his possessions and giving the money to the poor was tantamount to annihilating his ego. This man needed a change of heart, because only a change of heart could liberate him to swap a wealthy lifestyle for a rich life. Sadly, the man trudged away with a heavy heart knowing that sameness, not adventure, would define his life.

After the man dragged himself away, Jesus – seizing every chance to teach – said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who trust in riches...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."

This passage reminds me of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes. He said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me; it is the parts that I do understand." Indeed, today's passage is one that makes most Presbyterians squirm.

One of the struggles most of us face is the place of wealth in our lives. How much time and how much energy do we devote to pursuing it? For what purposes will we use it? How do we prevent it from skewing our vision of what is genuinely important?

We ought not fall victim to romanticizing poverty. The stress of never having enough of the basic necessities and living one serious illness away from being homeless will not free you to live an anxiety-free existence. It will most likely take years off of your life. But the advertising industry's mantra that happiness and satisfaction are just an Amazon click away is a lie that will send you down the wrong road. Like a shot of caffeine and sugar, material treasures can give us a short-term thrill, but only spiritual treasures can satisfy our deepest yearnings.

We know that money is essential and it can enhance our lives. It can help us purchase a home, advance our education, and allow us to travel to broaden our view of God's creation. The problem comes when we fall for the lie that stuff will make life fulfilling and hopeful. The problem comes when we never experience the joy and satisfaction of giving away a portion of our money to change people's lives and to support institutions that enhance health, wholeness, and wellbeing.

Soon you will be receiving a letter from the church regarding your pledge for next year. Please do not put it in the recycling bin or shove it aside. Consider the lift it will bring your soul to be generous and imagine the many lives that will be impacted when we combine our gifts. Over the past 19 months, we have proven that a global pandemic cannot halt our ministry and mission. In fact, it spurred us upward. It prompted your generous, caring heart. Only a lack of financial support can cripple us.

Your giving to God should not be coerced by the pastors dumping a guilt trip on you. Neither should your giving be a bargaining session with God – "God, I'll give a portion of my income to the church, but I'm expecting something in return: a raise in salary, good health, successful children."<sup>3</sup>

Making a commitment to God is more than good thoughts, faithful attendance and volunteering time. Making a pledge is a concrete commitment to God because you put your money where your heart is. It is an undeniable expression of support for the ministry and mission of Westminster. It is a declaration that this community of faith makes a difference in people's lives and is a glowing candle on the hill in a despairing world.

As today's passage reminds us, it is also a way of keeping your head screwed on right. It is radical resistance to the notion that the accumulation of wealth will satisfy the hunger in our soul. It is the counter-cultural defiance of the materialistic mindset that seeks to lure us with glittering images but leaves us wading in the shallow end of the pool rather than diving into the depths of a rich and beautiful and fulfilling life.

Your financial commitment is also your response to the gift of life and the blessings you enjoy. It is a way to express the gratitude in your heart in a way that words alone simply cannot and then watching to see what God can do with our resources.

Member Jen Barrington's sister, Liz Forney, is a Presbyterian minister and she tells the story "of a little girl she knows who once saved up her allowance to an all-time high of \$12. When that little girl heard her mother was going to the grocery, she begged to be taken along so she could find something to buy worthy of the money she had collected. Up and down the aisles they went, passing by candy and donuts and toys and books, considering possible investments for the child's cash in her little purse. Alas, though, nothing really made the cut."

"As they were leaving the store they saw a group of people playing some music and collecting donations to build a new church in their small town. Near their collection buckets was a sketch of the church they hoped to build. It caught the child's eye, because she was a regular at Sunday school herself. She opened her purse and pulled out

the roll of twelve one dollar bills. Her mother held her breath wondering if her daughter would count off one, two, possibly three of her dollars. But the child walked over to the bucket and dropped the whole wad of cash in at once. She walked back to her mother with a large grin on her face. Mom asked, 'Why did you pick that to spend your money on?' Without missing a beat, the little girl said, 'I want to see what God can do.'"<sup>4</sup>

We can only imagine what God will do with our gifts in the coming year. What do you imagine God can do with your gift?

#### NOTES

1. Adam Hamilton, *Enough*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), p.99.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Scott Black Johnson.
4. Liz Forney, "Are You All In?" Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, November 5, 2006, as told by Shannon Kershner.