

Many of you might be familiar with the story that I told the children.

The phrase, 'it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven,' is one of the better known phrases attributed to Jesus.

It's a quotable sound bite, and it's often used as such.

The problem is that if you only focus on that sentence, you miss the rest of the context, which is more nuanced than that one sentence lets on.

Jesus and the rich man actually have a really interesting interaction.

The rich man asks him, Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus almost blows him off with a reply that feels callous to me.

Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. [Oh, and by the way] 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.'"

You know, do that stuff and you should be okay.

But the rich man wont let up and maybe it's because he knows Jesus isn't taking his request seriously.

So he presses on and he tells Jesus, "Yea, I know, I have been doing all those things since my youth..."

Then it's as if Jesus pauses, really reflects on his original question, and who he is, as a person behind those riches.

The text says that Jesus looked at him and loved him, and then 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."*

Because of the rich man's persistence, Jesus offer this truth, maybe only realizing after his follow-up question that this man is serious, he's struggling and he wants some guidance.

He gets a really bad rap, but I do commend him for being self-aware enough to know that he was missing something, and then to go seeking the answers from this wise teacher.

Maybe he couldn't handle the truth, maybe he wasn't ready to change his life, but for whatever reason, he wasn't able to follow Jesus.

In fact, quite the opposite, as we're told that he was shocked and he went away, grieving.

I think Jesus' message was too complicated for him.

You see, being faithful isn't about checking off boxes.

It's not about saying, okay, I didn't murder anyone, I didn't lie, I didn't defraud anyone, I honored my father and mother, I even said my prayers every night this week, I'm good, my spot in heaven is still reserved with my name on it.

Faith in God and commitment to Jesus is a 24/7 lifestyle, which should inform all of our thoughts, and the entire way we navigate through this world.

Our Christianity should be part and parcel of who we are, it should exist at the core of our very being, and our values should infuse every decision that we make.

I know, it's not very realistic, a tall order, but in an ideal world, if we were ideal Christians, that's what it means to be a disciple.

When Jesus tells the rich man to follow him, that's what he's asking for.

Jesus wants your whole life, not just checking off a few boxes so that you can sleep well at night.

I think of discipleship as a spectrum from not very faithful to incredibly devout.

On any given day, we are somewhere on that spectrum and we can always be a little bit better.

So, one place to start, to move a little further towards the incredibly devout end of discipleship is to think about those things which occupy most of our mental energy, and then ask ourselves, as were engaging them faithfully?

Jesus presumably knew who this man was, maybe he had heard of him, maybe he could tell from the way he presented himself, but Jesus quickly knew that wealth and riches occupied a lot of this man's time and attention.

He knew that earning money, spending his money and managing his countless possessions probably took up the bulk of his time.

So Jesus' diagnosis for him was the he needed to rid himself of the money and possessions, because they were the roadblock which were preventing him from being a true follower of Christ.

Maybe he did all those other things right, checked off all those other boxes, but the time he spent on those paled in comparison to the time he spent on his money and his stuff, so Jesus said, that's what you need to clear out.

Get rid of your stuff, your money, that will smooth the path between you and me.

Then you can follow me.

You'll no longer be burdened by those distractions.

Jesus is calling us into deep discipleship, into interdependence, not independence.

I think that's what he's talking about when he says "follow me" so many other times throughout his ministry.

Like when he tells the fishermen to drop their nets and follow him.

Or when he tells Levi, the tax collector, who is sitting at this tax booth to follow him.

Or when he tells us to take up our cross and follow him.

And all of these calls stem from Jesus' deep and abiding love for us.

I don't want us to overlook that important detail, as Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the rich man, loved him and then told him to sell his possessions and follow him.

Yes Jesus wants us to give sacrificially and he doesn't want us to hoard our wealth, because it's a stumbling block to authentically following him, it prevents us from living into our interconnectedness.

If you feel like you have a lot of money squirreled away, you become insulated from the needs of those around you, and the problems like a downturn in the economy affect others in a way that they don't affect you.

Wealth makes it possible for us to cordon ourselves off from the needs of the world, the struggles of our neighbor and the deep and fulfilling nature of living interdependently.

The knowledge that we rely on others and others rely on us, it shapes our actions.

Vast wealth severs us from the deep relationships we have with others, it allows us to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are totally independent and we don't need other people.

We think that whatever problems befall us, we can buy our way out of them.

But we know that money hardly solves all of life's problems and that deception prevents us from asking for, and receiving the gift of help.

My colleagues might disagree with me, but I don't think this passage is primarily about taking a vow of poverty.

I think that the rich man's obsession with independence is what prevented him from being a true disciple of Jesus.

Was Jesus' message partially about living a simplistic, frugal life? Yes. But exclusively about that? No.

I don't want someone who lives paycheck to paycheck to think they suddenly are on the end of the extremely faithful end of the discipleship spectrum, because poverty alone isn't a sufficient condition either.

The problem is what we spend our time and energy on.

You can't become wealthy without giving it much thought.

The rich man spent too much time and energy on his money and his possessions and they prevented him from being in community with Jesus and his disciples.

But it's not about wealth for all of us.

If any of us were to stop Jesus, kneel at his feet and ask him what we must do to inherit eternal life, I think he would have different answers for many of us.

For one person, he might say go, kick your drinking habit, then come and follow me.

For someone else he might say, go, cure yourself of your vanity and your huge ego, when you realize the last shall be first, then you can come and follow me.

For others he might say, go, cure yourself of your racism or xenophobia or your obsession with your career, then come and follow me.

We all have different things, which prevent us from being in deep, abiding relationship with God and each other.

As I said before, faith should be a 24/7 thing, and those things, which occupy your mental energy but are never considered in conversation with your faith, those are the things which we need to let go of before we truly follow Jesus.

The rich man, although he had a bad reputation, at least he had enough self-awareness to know that even though he checked off the boxes of the 10 Commandments, he was still missing something.

His faith was still lacking and Jesus shined the light on his wealth, telling him that was what was preventing him from following Jesus, unencumbered.

What in your life is occupying so much of your mental energy that it's preventing you from being the disciple you want to be?

What are the things you think about or worry about which you don't connect to your faith or keep you separated from others?

If you stopped Jesus on the street, he would know you, love you and look at you, where would he shine the light in your life?

What would he tell you to get rid of before you followed him?

May we all have enough self-awareness that the rich man had, to know what we need to get rid of, so we can move that much further on the spectrum towards deep, authentic, interdependent discipleship.

Amen.