

**GOD INVITES CONFUSED PEOPLE****MARK 10:17-31**

How many of you remember the movie, “City Slickers”? You might remember a scene between Billy Crystal, who played a city slicker out west on a vacation, and Jack Palance, who played a crusty old cowboy. Here’s how their conversation went: Palance: “How old are you?” Crystal: “Thirty-nine”. Palance: “Yeah. You all come out here about the same age. Same problems. Spend fifty weeks a year getting knots in your rope – and then you think two weeks up here will untie them for you. None of you get it. Do you know what the secret of life is?” Crystal: “No, what?” Palance: “It’s this.” [Holds up his index finger] Crystal: “Your finger?” Palance: “One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and everything else don’t mean nothing.” Crystal: That’s great, but what’s the one thing?” Palance: “That’s what you’ve got to figure out.”

Billy Crystal played a character who was confused. In other words, he didn’t know how to prioritize his life. What was most important? What matters the most? What was the one thing that brought a sense of focus and direction to his life? Those are good questions for any of us to ask of ourselves. Have you found your “one thing” yet in life? Do you know what’s most important and what matters the most to you? Is there one thing that provides focus and direction to your life? Even people who lived 2000 years ago struggled with those questions. Let’s look at a story about Jesus and His encounter with a man who was confused. This man needed to discover the one thing. He even knew what the one thing was! But he was very wrong about how to obtain that one thing. As a result, his life was a failure. Let’s read about it just now.

God invites confused people. Today concludes a series of messages that point to one central truth about God. He is an inviting God who invites all sorts of undeserving, messed up people into an eternal relationship with Himself. Dirty people. Empty people. Lost people. Tired people. And even confused people. And God invites us to invite other people to Him as well. The most common word for invitation is the word “come.” Jesus said to the man in our story today, “Come, follow me.” It’s always through Jesus that God invites people who are confused. There are two central concepts that come out of this story that I want us to reflect on today. The first one has to do with ...

**THE SINGLE GREATEST POSSESSION IN ALL OF LIFE.**

What is it? Eternal life. This man already knew that - which is fascinating. He comes to Jesus and asks, “... ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” (Mk 10:17 NIV) Jesus doesn’t contradict him. Jesus never says, “You’re wrong about what is most important in life.” The way in which Jesus responds indicates that He agrees with this man that the single greatest possession in all of life is eternal life. This man was very rich, quite young and had already attained a position of considerable influence in the community. He had everything going for him in this life. At a young age, he’d already obtained the things that many people spend a

lifetime trying to get – wealth, security, influence, respect. And yet he realized that something was missing. His heart and mind were profoundly uncomfortable. Even though he possessed so much, he was afraid he didn't yet possess what matters the most. He wondered if he really did possess eternal life. Somehow he knew Jesus could help him with his confusion and so he worked up the courage and looked for the opportunity to have a one-to-one conversation with Jesus about eternal life.

Let me share with you three biblical facts about eternal life. First of all, eternal life is God's life in both quantity and quality. Let's think about quantity first. Now, if something is eternal it lasts forever. This kind of life never goes out of existence. Yes, it will change at the point of physical death, but it continues on in some way, shape or form. The Bible teaches that God offers everlasting, never-ending quantity of life. But, think about this. Suppose life lasted forever, but it was the kind of life we have here on earth – a life that's subject to all kinds of disease, pain, heartache, disappointment and frustration. If that were the case, maybe eternal life wouldn't be such a wonderful possession after all!

That's why the quality of eternal life is as important as the quantity. This is a kind of life that comes directly from God and is, in fact, the life by which God Himself lives. This is beyond biological, physical life. This is rich, deep spiritual life. God is love; therefore, eternal life is saturated in love. God is the source of any and all peace and joy; therefore, eternal life is saturated in peace and joy. God lacks nothing; therefore, eternal life lacks or needs nothing. To have that kind of life and for it to last forever sounds like a possession worth having! What could possibly be more important – money, possessions, pleasure, accomplishment?

Secondly, eternal life can't be earned or deserved. This man was absolutely right that eternal life is the single greatest possession. But he was wrong about how to get it. He gives his assumption away by how he asks the question, "... 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Mk 10:17 NIV) He assumes he must do something in order to get eternal life. After all, he had done things to get rich and become influential. Why should it be different with getting eternal life? We discover that he was a very moral, upstanding person. Even Jesus doesn't contradict him when he says that he'd kept the 10 commandments rigorously. Surely, there was something he could or should do to get eternal life.

Notice also that this man's question assumes that eternal life is something that can be inherited: "... 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Mk 10:17 NIV) Perhaps he'd gotten rich because he'd inherited a ton of money from his own father. That's how it works in everyday life – sons often inherit from their fathers. Perhaps that's how it works when it came to getting eternal life, he reasoned. Maybe some people are just entitled to receive it, deserve it, or inherit it like an estate or a bequest. I believe this man was completely sincere when he asked Jesus this question. "How can I get eternal life? What should I do? How can I position myself to get the single greatest possession out there?"

Thirdly, eternal life can only be obtained as a gift. You can't earn, deserve or inherit it. When Jesus tells His disciples that it's harder for a rich person to get into the Kingdom of God (which is, by the way, the same concept as Heaven or eternal life in this context), than it is for a camel to get through the eye of a sewing needle, they're completely dumbfounded. What? How can that be? In Jesus' day and time, everyone believed that having lots of money was a sure sign that God loved you and was blessing you. Poverty was considered a sign that God just didn't like you very much. So, it was obvious who was going to get into Heaven. Rich people were at the front of that line! When Jesus offers up this ridiculous image of a camel trying to fit itself through the eye of a needle, what He was really saying is that it's impossible. The disciples were shocked. If rich people can't get eternal life, what hope is there for anyone to get eternal life? Jesus answers that question with this statement, "... 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.'" (Mk. 10:27 NIV)

What's Jesus' real point? It's impossible for anyone to earn, deserve or inherit eternal life. That's because the standard is absolute moral perfection. Even very good, moral people fall short because just one wrong act, thought or attitude is enough to disqualify you before an absolutely holy, pure and perfect God. If that's the standard to get into Heaven – and it is - all of us are disqualified. In fact, the only thing any of us earn, deserve or inherit is a ticket straight to Hell – eternal separation from God forever and ever.

That explains why God did what He did by sending His Son, Jesus, into this world to die upon a cross and rise again from the dead. What did that accomplish? Jesus was the only Person who has ever lived that was sinless in every act, thought or attitude. He was and is morally perfect. He became our substitute on the cross by taking our place. He paid the penalty of your sins and mine then and there. His resurrection sealed the deal demonstrating His complete victory over sin, death, the devil and Hell itself. And when you put your trust in Jesus for eternal life, God gives you eternal life as His gift. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, anyone who believes has eternal life." (Jo 6:47 NLT) If you earn something, it's not a gift. If you deserve something, it's not a gift. Eternal life can only be obtained as a gift. The Bible says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 6:23 NLT) That brings us now to a second central concept based on this story. If the single greatest possession is eternal life, then obtaining that life ought to be...

### **THE SINGLE GREATEST PRIORITY IN ALL OF LIFE.**

During the Desert Storm invasion of Kuwait and Iraq back in 1991, Col. William Post received an urgent fax from headquarters stating that 400 cases of jelly were not accounted for on the colonel's records. He ordered a private to look for the jelly, but he couldn't find it. A second fax about the jelly issue came rather quickly and sounded more urgent than the first. It said the end of the month was

approaching and that every effort must be given to find the jelly or account for it. Co. Post decided to ignore the request. Then a third fax came and demanded that the colonel immediately respond to the need to find the jelly – or else. Col. Post responded by fax, “Look, I can find the jelly or I can kick Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait. Which do you prefer? I can’t do both.” We all have to set priorities every day of our lives.

What is it, then? What is the single greatest priority in all of life? Following Jesus. Jesus said to the man in our story, “... ‘come, follow me.’” (Mk 10:21 NIV) This man was all twisted up inside, confused and wondering what on earth he should do to earn or deserve eternal life. Jesus says, “Come, follow me.” If eternal life is the single greatest possession in all of life, then following Jesus is the “one thing” – that elusive “one thing” – the single greatest priority in all of life. It’s the same for you, me or any person who has recognized that eternal life is the single greatest and most valuable possession in all of life.

Let me point out three facts about following Jesus based on this story. Here’s the first one. Following Jesus enables you to worship the real God. Everyone worships something or someone. With keen insight, Jesus put His finger on this man’s real god. It was money, wealth and possessions. He didn’t just have money; his money had him. His wealth was his ultimate security in life. That’s what he trusted in even more than God. That’s what mattered most and was of utmost importance to him. It became all too obvious when Jesus challenged him to give up his great wealth and start following Jesus. Jesus said to him, “... ‘One thing you lack.’...” (Mk 10:21 NIV) Actually, this man had not kept all of the Ten Commandments as perfectly as he assumed. The very first commandment tells us not to worship any other gods. The one true God didn’t occupy His rightful place in this man’s life. Money filled that spot. Whatever is your ultimate security in life is your god. That’s what you worship. You don’t have to be religious to have a god. You don’t have to go to church to have a god. Whatever you trust in live for ultimately is your god. Whatever ends up being that “one thing” in your life is actually what you worship whether of not you call or recognize it as god.

When you decide to follow Jesus, you begin to worship the right God – the real God – the one, true God. That can be a wrenching decision as it clearly was for this man in our story. Why? Because it will mean ending a relationship with something that has become very significant, precious and important to you. This man loved his wealth. That may, in fact, be your god, too. It is for a lot of people who live around us. They may be good, decent, moral people but their ultimate security is found in their possessions. Now, other things can function as gods, too. In fact, we human beings have an almost infinite ability to create and worship all sorts of alternatives to the one, true God. Your god might be another person, pleasure or accomplishments. It might even be yourself. If you are your own ultimate security, then you worship yourself as god.

I don't know if there's a sadder, more sobering scene in the entire Bible than this one. This man understood exactly what Jesus wanted him to do. Jesus had revealed his true god to him, but the man couldn't disown that god. He actually preferred the god of money to the one, true, real God. Sadly, he'd discovered the "one thing" of his life. It was money. And even though he realized that money couldn't give him eternal life, he couldn't give it up. In that moment, he made the worst decision of his life. He refused the gift of eternal life. He was rich, secure, and influential in this life. But from eternity's perspective – nothing.

Here's a second fact about following Jesus. It will enable you to prioritize your life. If following Jesus is the single greatest priority in your life, it will bring all of your life and living into proper alignment. When you worship the right God by following Jesus, everything else just flows from that central focus. Cultivating that relationship becomes the central passion of your life. Pleasing God becomes the central desire of your life. Following Jesus will reorder and change your priorities. It will change, for instance, how you use your time, how you work, maybe even where you work, how you relax, what your goals and ambitions in life are, how you use money, how you treat people, how you relate to your spouse and kids, what you pour your life into, what you read, what movies and TV shows you watch, how you treat people of other races, what you think about the poor. Following Jesus changes everything! In fact, following Jesus will demand a life of ongoing change – sometimes stretching and painful change - as the Holy Spirit shows you what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus' reaction to this man challenges me. It says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him...." (Mk 10:21 NIV) The word "look" there means a deep, penetrating understanding of something or someone. Precise insight. Jesus sized up this man and could see that he was confused. But there was nothing cold, hard or clinical about Jesus' insight. Jesus loves confused people just as He loves dirty, empty, lost and tired people, too. I'm all but certain that we could look around our lives and find some spiritually confused people – people trying to figure out what matters the most and having a hard time setting the right priorities. Do you love confused people like Jesus did? Are you praying for any spiritually confused people living next door to you, going to school with you, or working in the next office to you? Do you ever invite spiritually confused people to church with you?

One final thought. Following Jesus enables you to live authentically. That's the great curse of being spiritually confused. For all of his supposed sincerity, this man in the story was actually revealed as kind of a hypocrite. How so? He thought he wanted eternal life more than anything else, but his encounter with Jesus revealed that to be a lie. All of his goodness and morality were kind of a sham. In the end, he was just a self-centered slave of his own possessions. Living authentically is a process. None of us get there in a big hurry. But here's the point. You can only ever get there – authenticity – if and when you follow Jesus. The more you follow Jesus, the more your words will start to match up with your actual lifestyle. The more you follow Jesus, the more you will practice

what you preach. The more you follow Jesus, the more what you will say you believe is what you will actually live out. When the Holy Spirit lives in you as a result of following Jesus, He will push you towards integrity. Integrity is another word for living authentically. And integrity only happens when you make following Jesus the single greatest priority in all of your life.

A high school science teacher wanted to demonstrate a concept to his students. He took a large mouth glass jar and put several good sized rocks into it. Then he asked the class, "Is it full?" Most people in the class said, "Yes." Then the teacher took a bucket of gravel and poured it into the jar. That gravel found spaces between the big rocks. He asked his class, "Is it full, now?" Again, most of the class said, "Yes." Next, the teacher got a big can full of sand and managed to pour all of it into the jar with the big rocks and the gravel. For the third time, he asked his class, "Is it full, now?" By now most of the class had become wary of answering, but a few said, "Yes, it's full." The teacher brought out a pitcher of water and was able to pour all of it into the jar right up to its neck.

At this point, the teacher said, "What's the point of this demonstration?" One student raised his hand and responded, "No matter how full your schedule is in life, you can always squeeze in more things." "No," answered the teacher. "The point is that unless you put the big rocks into the jar first, you will never get them in. The big rocks represent the important things of life – the things that matter - God, family, friends. If you fill your life with small things – the gravel, sand, the water – you will never have the time or the space for what's important."

Jesus is the biggest rock in the jar of your life and mine. At least, He should be. Following Him – knowing Him, loving Him, obeying Him, becoming like Him, serving Him – is the "one thing." At least, it should be. Why? Because following Jesus leads to the single greatest possession in all of life: eternal life. God invites confused people into an eternal relationship with Him. And what clears up that confusion is Jesus. Is He the "one thing" in your life? Is He the "one thing" around which everything else revolves and finds its proper place?