

“ONE THING YOU LACK.”**MARK 10:17-27**

Some of you may have heard of Clarence Jordan. He was a Baptist Christian, a farmer, and a New Testament Greek scholar who lived in the middle of the 20th century. He authored a paraphrase of the New Testament called the Cotton Patch version. He was the founder of Koinonia Farm, a small but influential religious community – a Christian commune, so to speak - in southwest Georgia. He was also instrumental in the founding of the Habitat for Humanity organization which has built homes for people all over the world. One day, a 40 year old single woman arrived at Koinonia Farm in an old rundown car. She stayed at the farm for a while and experienced what it would be like to become a part of this community. After a few days, she approached Jordan and asked about joining the community. He told her that was fine, but they had one requirement. Each person had to sell off all of their earthly possessions and come into the commune flat broke. Looking at her car, Jordan didn't think that'd be a problem. But, oddly enough, she became alarmed and agitated. Jordan couldn't understand her reaction. As poor as she looked, he was really surprised by it. Jesus said it would be hard for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God, but not even one wealthy person had ever applied to join Koinonia Farm yet.

Jordan asked the woman if she'd have difficulty getting rid of her possessions. Yes, she told him, it would be a major difficulty – somewhere between an \$80,000 - \$90,000 difficulty. Jordan swallowed hard and reiterated she'd still have to dispose of the money to become a part of Koinonia Farm. But how, she asked. Give it to the poor; give it away to relatives: throw it over a bridge, whatever – she was told – but that was the rule. What about giving it to Koinonia Farm, she asked. Jordan grinned and said, “No. If you put that money in here several things would happen. First of all, we'd quit growing peanuts and start discussing theology. Not healthy for us.... [Then], if you put that money in here, you would think we courted you for your money, that we loved you for your money. And in the next place,... you would get the idea you were God's guardian angel, that you endowed the rest of us, and that all of us ought to be grateful to you for your generosity. Now, for your sake and our sakes, you get rid of that money and come walk this way with us.” Tearfully, the woman replied, “I can't do that.” She packed up her old car and left. Jordan never saw her again. I'm told that's a true story. Does it remind you of another true story – one that comes from the Bible? It reminds me of a specific story found in Mark 10. Let's read it together. **READ, 1002.**

We've been looking at five different passages in the Bible that have something in common. They all have the phrase “one thing” somewhere in the text. Life can get complicated and confusing for all of us. Even our relationship with God can seem complicated and confusing at times. We can yearn for what's simple and clear. Often less truly is more when it comes to life and living. And often less is more when it comes to a relationship with God as well. The “one thing” statement in our Scripture passage today is something Jesus said to a rich man who approached him one day and asked Him, “How do I get eternal life?” The Bible says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him. ‘One thing you lack,’ he said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and

you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mk. 10:21 NIV) Let’s try to uncover what’s important to understand about this story by asking two questions. First,

WHAT DID THE RICH, YOUNG RULER LACK?

If you’ve been around churches for a long time, this is probably a familiar story to you – Jesus’ encounter and conversation with the rich, young ruler. Right there is something interesting to observe. Mark’s version of this story – the one we just read – told us clearly this was a wealthy man. Matthew included this story in his Gospel, too, and he told us the man was both rich and young. Luke also included this story in his Gospel and he told us the man was rich and a ruler. When you put all three accounts – Matthew, Mark, and Luke - together, you end up with the story of the rich, young ruler!

What did this man lack? It might be helpful to observe what he did not lack, first of all. For one thing, he didn’t lack the right question. Many people in life never get around to asking the right questions much less getting the right answers. But his man asked Jesus an important, appropriate, and insightful question, ““Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”” (Mk. 10:17 NLT) Oh, we might quibble about his question. It’s true his question assumed he could maybe do something to get, to merit, or to deserve eternal life, but we all know you can only ever receive it as a gift. But let’s give the guy a break! He didn’t have the benefit of twenty centuries of Christian theology to give his question the proper nuance. Clearly, his question was his way of asking, “How can I have a relationship with God?” Isn’t that a very important question however you ask it? Isn’t that the right question for anyone to ask when all is said and done?

Secondly, he didn’t lack human credentials or achievements. He had both in bunches! He was wealthy, rich, a man of substantial material possessions. Whether he inherited his wealth or figured out a way to get rich on his own, we’re not told. But it was something in his favor – a credential or an achievement. The story also implied he had good, moral character. He told Jesus that he’d kept all the Mosaic commandments since he was a boy. Jesus didn’t challenge him on that issue. This was a good man. If he’d lived today, he would probably be someone who attended church faithfully and lived an outwardly upright life. He’d be the sort of man you’d love to have as a neighbor. Good son-in-law material! Luke told us this man was a ruler. He had influence. This man undoubtedly enjoyed respect, esteem, and prestige in the community. He had access to the movers and shakers in society; he was probably one himself! Matthew told us he had the benefit of being a young man. He was just starting out in life. His future was very bright, hopeful, and positive. He had all the time necessary to become more successful and accomplished.

Thirdly, this man didn’t lack an impressive personality. He possessed that as well! I see remarkable courage in him. How so? Well, again, he was part of the ruling Jewish elite who ultimately were responsible for Jesus’ execution. Yet here we see him coming openly to Jesus for counsel in broad daylight. By way of contrast, I think of Nicodemus – another ruler impressed with Jesus – who was so concerned about the opinions of his peers that he first came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. I also see remarkable

humility. Not only did he run up to Jesus, but he also fell on his knees before Jesus. Imagine that! A wealthy man, an influential man, a morally upright man, a man with credentials, clout, and connections down there in the dust on his knees before this carpenter from Nazareth! Why? He wanted answers and spiritual direction. His desire was so strong and so urgent that he ran to Jesus and knelt before the Lord. What is that? Humility. Finally, this man appeared to be authentic. Isn't there a kind of transparency and a genuineness about this man that leaves you with a wonderful impression of him? He had a need in his life. He was honest and straightforward enough to admit his need and ask for help. Impressive!

So, this man had a lot going for him. He asked an important question of Jesus, had credentials and achievements under his belt, and had an impressive personality. Nevertheless, it's as if Jesus said, "Even with all you've got going for you, you still lack one thing." Was the issue really about his money, his wealth, or his possessions? Yes and no. Let's talk about the "yes" part of it first. In what way was the issue about money? The Bible has a kind of mixed message when it comes to wealth and money. On the one hand, there are passages that teach clearly that wealth honestly acquired in life is a blessing of God to be enjoyed. Faithfulness, hard work and honesty often do result in material blessing. Financial wealth can also be used to build the Kingdom of God. Missionaries get supported here and overseas, churches are funded to bring people to Jesus and help them become like Him, children and youth are reached for Christ, the hungry are fed, the desperately poor are given aid, and the uneducated are taught. How? Through the money – the wealth – God's people return to the Lord.

On the other hand, there are many passages in the Bible that warn you that wealth has the power to make you forget about God. That's what Jesus was getting at when He said here, "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." (Mk. 10:25 NIV) It can make a person greedy and endanger your integrity. It can make you proud and contemptuous of other people. It can open your heart to temptation that corrupts your soul. Ironically, wealth can become an outright enemy of the things of God in your life because it encourages you to keep God at arm's length. Frankly, the Bible says money can be a great blessing as well as a great curse.

Worst of all, money can even become your god. Jesus knew that full well, because he said plainly and clearly, "You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both." (Mt. 6:24 MSG) Apparently, something like this had happened in the heart of the rich, young ruler. The man loved his wealth more than he loved God. His wealth was his real god. He didn't just have his possessions; his possessions had him. Money had become his ultimate security in life. It's what he trusted in the most. It was his safety net. In other words, wealth had become his god. Whatever name you give it – whatever is your ultimate security, whatever you trust in, whatever provides you with the greatest feeling of safety – that's your god.

So, yes, when Jesus put his finger on the money issue in this man's life, that was most certainly the issue. But in another sense, it wasn't. When I was reflecting on this passage this week, it struck me how Jesus answered the man's question, "How do I get eternal life?" He told the rich, young ruler, "One thing you lack." The problem was much more about the rich, young ruler lacking something essential than giving up something he already possessed. What was it he lacked? The rich, young ruler lacked the ability to value God accurately. He lacked the ability to see that a relationship with God is infinitely precious. He lacked the ability – as Jesus put it elsewhere – to "seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need." (Mt. 6:33 NLT) He lacked the ability to see what truly mattered both in this life and for eternity. He lacked the ability to put His security in God alone. He lacked the desire to so value and so pursue a relationship with God that everything else in life came in a distant second. He lacked the ability to worship God as God authentically. And for that reason, he was unable to divest himself of his wealth and start to follow Jesus. "One thing you lack." It was much more about the rich, young ruler lacking something essential – utter and absolute devotion to God - than giving up something he already possessed – his wealth. Interesting story, to be sure. But it makes me want to ask you and me a second question.

WHAT DO YOU LACK?

Here's another way to think about this story and how it impacts your life and mine. We all know that a disease or an illness can have a variety of outward symptoms. Take cancer as an example. Too many of us here have first-hand experience with that dreaded disease. Cancer is an illness that produces a wide variety of symptoms – pain, lumps in different parts of your body, anemia, unexpected weight loss, fever, bleeding - just to name a few. The symptoms are your body's way of telling you that you have an illness. The symptoms point to a bigger, deeper, more significant problem. There are physical illnesses and spiritual illnesses. Spiritual illness has spiritual symptoms, too. The rich, young ruler had a spiritual illness. Doctor Jesus diagnosed it. The rich, young ruler didn't accurately value God and a relationship with God. I believe that's what Jesus put His finger on when He said, "One thing you lack." The ability to value God accurately was the one thing he lacked. The specific symptom of his illness was a wrong relationship to wealth. Money was his god. Money had become his god precisely because he lacked the ability to value God accurately.

Now, we may have a different symptom than the rich, young ruler, but all of us have the same illness. The Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Rom. 3:23 NLT) Not only have we fallen short of God's standards, but we don't really see Him for who He is – His glory, His holiness, His love, or His perfection. The fact is none of us have the innate ability to value God accurately. It's only by God's grace and the spiritual light the Holy Spirit shines into our lives that we can begin to understand that a relationship with Him is infinitely precious. So do we all have the same problem as the rich, young ruler? Yes and no. Our specific symptom might not be worshiping money as our god, so in that sense, no. But each and every one of us struggle to value God accurately, so in that sense, yes. We have the same

illness. Without the grace of God, we lack the very same one thing as the rich, young ruler – the ability to see who and what matters the most both in this life and in eternity.

Let's make sure we don't confuse the symptoms with the illness itself. Our symptoms may differ. By the way, don't be too quick to dismiss money, wealth, or possessions as a symptom you struggle with personally. "Oh, that's not my problem. Jesus wasn't talking to me. This story doesn't apply to my life." Careful, be very careful right there. Don't be too hasty in dismissing materialism as a symptom in your own life. The fact is materialism is perhaps the primary idol – the number one alternative to the one, true God - out there. It can be the god of both poor people and very wealthy people. It manifests itself in numerous ways. Did you know Jesus Himself spoke more often about money than Heaven or Hell, sexual immorality, or violence? One out of every six statements of Jesus recorded in the four Gospels concerns money. I think He knew something we'd like to avoid. We live in a culture where money and the things money can buy dominate most people's lives from birth to death. It's the unusual person – it's the unusual follower of Jesus – who's completely free of the god of materialism.

But, yes, surely, there are different symptoms of the same illness beyond just money or materialism. Pride is a major one. It manifests itself in many ways. We've seen ugly outbreaks of racism in recent weeks. Racism is one expression of pride. What is racism if it isn't the sinful need to feel superior to people of a different skin color than you? People enslaved to racism actually prefer its lie to God and His truth about the value of all human beings. Some people have allowed drugs or alcohol to control their lives. Still others have allowed their sexual appetite to become their god. Do you remember the Old Testament character, Samson? That was part of his problem. Here was a man who was blessed by God from birth with all sorts of gifts and abilities, yet the Bible revealed that Samson valued sex more than his relationship to God. It led to his destruction. Many people have made personal happiness a god. They pursue happiness – however they might define it - more than pleasing God. Ironically, they never discover that pleasing God is the only way to ever discover true happiness. Other people have made ambition or their version of success more important than pleasing God. Other folk have made a god out of having power or influence over others. Still others make other people more important – of greater value - than God or a relationship with God. It becomes more important to please a spouse, a child, or a friend than it does God Himself. Many, many different symptoms, but they all point to the same illness: we fail to see God for who He is and to value Him above anything else.

The rich, young ruler was frustrated with his spiritual life. He asked Jesus, "How can I get eternal life?" I love this part of the story. "Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said." (Mk 10:21 NIV) Isn't it interesting that the disciples remembered how Jesus looked at this man – so much so that they made a point of mentioning it to Mark who wrote down the story? I found it fascinating that the Greek word for "look" here is also used when Peter denied Jesus three times and the Bible says that Jesus "looked" at Peter. There was something profound and memorable in the look of Jesus. Here Jesus sees right through this rich, young influential man and his question to the real issue at stake. But it wasn't a cold, uncaring, or judgmental look.

No, the look of Jesus was full of infinite love and compassion for this man. He was impressed by his sincerity. He wanted the best for him. How Jesus interacted with the rich, young ruler is instructive for us and so very important to remember.

Here's something I know about being a follower of Jesus. There's a fundamental need for each of us to have what I would call a first time encounter with Jesus. Jesus looks deep into our souls and says, "One thing you lack." He helps us to see the value of God and a relationship with Him. It happens in many different ways – sometimes instantly, sometimes slowly - but the outcome is the same. We emerge followers of Jesus ready to live life in a different way than before. You could say it's the moment of salvation, conversion, getting born again, being saved, whatever. But, in my experience with Jesus, there's never just one encounter or confrontation. Doctor Jesus keeps coming to us at different moments in our lives – often when we're frustrated like the rich, young ruler. He provides moments of profound diagnosis. He points out lovingly and gently, "My child, one thing you lack." He puts His finger on yet another issue, yet another symptom that needs correction. But it always comes back to the same illness. This side of Heaven you and I are always going to have trouble valuing God and a relationship with Him accurately. Just remember this. When Jesus begins to poke around in your life, probe your heart, test your motives, and challenge you to a closer walk with Him – and He will continue to do that your whole life long - He only ever does it out of love and compassion for you.

It happened in Tucson, Arizona back in 1986 at a gem collector's show. An amateur rock hound sold an egg sized, violet and blue stone to Roy Whetstine, a Texas gemologist, for \$10. The original asking price was \$15, but Whetstine talked him down to \$10. After months of rigorous appraisal, Whetstine made an announcement about his \$10 rock. It was a 1,905 carat star sapphire with an estimated, uncut value of \$2.28 million. His good fortune was more than good luck. He said, "I was used to handling rocks and saying, 'Yeah, that's a keeper' or 'That's no good.'" So what's the difference between a rock hound and a gemologist, between an amateur's \$10 rock and Whetstine's \$2.28 million find? It's an eye and a feel for value.

Jesus told the rich, young ruler, "One thing you lack." What was it he lacked? In a spiritual sense, he was like the amateur rock hound Roy Whetstine outmaneuvered. He didn't have an eye for value. Frankly, without God's grace and the Holy Spirit, you and I have exactly the same problem. When it comes right down to it, the difference between Heaven and Hell, the difference between eternal regret and eternal reward, the difference between eternity with God and eternity without God is an eye for what's truly valuable. It's knowing what matters most of all and living into it. Many people pass over the treasure of the Kingdom of God because they simply never perceive its incredible and eternal worth. That's why Jesus is both faithful and loving to keep on coming to us as often in life as necessary saying, "Come on, Rick, keep on pursuing the one thing. Put Me first. Keep Me first. Put My Kingdom first. Keep My Kingdom first. When you do that, you get everything else."