

LIFE'S GREATEST CHOICE

by Ray C. Stedman

One of my favorite stories of the New Testament is found in the tenth chapter of Mark. It is one I never tire of reading because it is so suggestive. Perhaps as we look at it you will see something important in it, too. Jesus is on his way from Jerusalem out into what we would call 'the sticks' to preach. He is going out into the country villages.

As he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good, but God alone. You know the commandments; Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother." And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth."

And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

Jesus never said a more startling thing to any individual than that one word, "You lack one thing." Certainly one thing can be very important. If you do not have the right thing it can make all the difference in the world. Here, for instance, is a fine electronic organ, fearfully and wonderfully made. But it is not producing music now because it lacks one thing, a player, one who can sweep across the keys and bring out all the harmony and symphony that is in the instrument. Perhaps that illustrates what this story is saying to us.

Here is a young man who came to Jesus with a great many things. I would like to point out six things about him that are most impressive. Three of them are very obvious, three of them are subtly hidden. But it is clear right away that there were three obvious things about him: he had youth; he had position (he was a ruler); and he had money. He sounds like an interesting and attractive young man.

When I was a boy I thought that if I could only get these three things I ought to be happy. I had youth. Everyone comes by that naturally---for a while. But I thought if I could also get position or power and some money, I really would have all that my heart could desire.

Here was a young man who had these things and these are important things. I am not going to pretend they are not. It is great to have them. Especially youth. I think more and more frequently of what George Bernard Shaw said, "Youth is so wonderful, it is a shame to waste it on young people." The older I grow the more I see the wisdom of what he says. Here was a young man who had the exuberance and vitality that goes with youth, and that is quite a bit.

This afternoon my wife went outside the house and saw one of our daughters crawling through the bathroom window into the house. She checked the door to see if it was unlocked, and found there was no apparent reason for her to do this other than that it simply looked like an interesting way to get into the house. It was different. That is youth, isn't it? It doesn't always make sense but it has a lot of fun. And this young man had youth. He had the exuberance that goes with it, the vitality, the ability to see the different and to enjoy doing it.

He also had position. He was a ruler. Even as a young man he had a position of authority. That is fun, too. It is a great feeling to be able to say to somebody else, "Go!" and he goes, and "Come!" and he comes, or to sit

at a desk and push a buzzer and someone jumps. In fact, it is so much fun that many people would give their right arm to be able to do it. Power, position, and authority---these are coveted things in the world today. This young man had them. He was a ruler of the Jews.

Then he also had money. That was probably the least important of the things he had, but to him it was important, because with money he could buy all the fine things he wanted. Doubtless he had everything his age could offer, because money permits that. It may not give you happiness, but it gives you the choice of what to be miserable with. He was able to afford things that others could not. He had all the luxury, the ease and the enjoyment of things that money could bring.

We would say, ordinarily, that according to the standards of our age this was a very fortunate young man, with his youth, position and money. But he had some other characteristics that are not quite as obvious. I would also suggest that he had a very attractive personality. This is revealed in certain of the things he did when he came to Jesus. First, he met him with the word, "Good Teacher," by which he indicated that he was a thoughtful, discerning young man. There were many people in that day who looked at Jesus and could see nothing but a trouble-making peasant, a bothersome fellow who kept sticking his nose into the wrong things and making trouble for everybody. There were many who were ready to write him off as being of no value at all; but this young man, as he looked at him, listened to him, heard the words he said, and saw the things he did, saw that there was something very remarkable about Jesus. So he came to him and said, "Good Teacher," revealing his discernment.

It was also evident that he had a considerable degree of courage, because he came publicly, at a time when the class of which he was a representative (the rulers of the Jews) were very much opposed to what Jesus was doing. After all, what he was saying among the people was upsetting the apple cart. It was threatening their position of power. Jesus was the revolutionary of his day, and he became so troublesome after a while that those in power felt they had to get rid of him. That is why they conspired to put him to death. Now here was a young man who belonged to that class of rulers, yet publicly and openly he came to Christ and greeted him. That took courage.

This young man was also a humble young man. The remarkable thing said here is that when he came to Christ he knelt down in front of him, publicly. "Oh, well," you say, "that is just the way people of the East greeted each other. That was but an Eastern custom." But it never was the custom for a ruler to kneel to a peasant. Never---in the East, or any other place or time. This would have seemed as out of place then as it would today if, in the streets of London, an ordinary Englishman would find the Queen of England kneeling at his feet. No, a ruler did not kneel to peasants, but this young man knelt to Jesus. Because he was a humble young man he realized that here was Someone who had something he needed, and he acknowledged it in this humble, public act of kneeling before Christ. So I know that he was an attractive, winsome young man, a man with a strong and good personality.

It is also clear that he had a clean record, and that is a most remarkable thing. We have had young people stand up and describe their involvement in terrible activities, their slavery to drugs, their fantasies with LSD, their participation in sexual deviations, etc. Sometimes Christian young people in our congregation have thought to themselves, "You know, it's wonderful to see the change in these lives. They seem to appreciate the delivering grace of God so much. Sometimes I wonder if I wouldn't be a better Christian if I had stepped over the traces a little more. I sometimes wish I didn't have such a clean record." Have you ever thought that? I've had adults say to me, "Perhaps it would have been better if I had thrown caution and morals to the wind and had a high old time, because these people redeemed from great sin seem to appreciate the grace of God so much." But it is not better. It is much better to have a clean record. Even if a man never became a Christian it is better to have a clean record. Deep indulgence in sinful habits creates a permanent train of thought and arouses lusts that hound and haunt a person for the rest of his life, and with which he must fight continuously. It is much better to have a clean record.

When this young man came to him. Jesus flashed upon him the light of six commandments. He didn't mention the first four commandments, which have to do with man's relationship to God. but he mentioned the last six, which have to do with a man's relationship to his neighbor. Jesus said to him,

"You know the commandments: Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother."

The young man looked Jesus full in the face and said to him with open-hearted honesty, "Lord, I have kept these things from my very youth."

Perhaps someone says, "I think that was a lie. I don't think he really kept these. This was an attempted deception on his part." I cannot agree with that. The reason I cannot is because I read that when Jesus looked at him he loved him. Now, I don't mean to imply by that that Jesus wouldn't have loved him if he hadn't kept these commandments. I want you to know that Jesus loves you, and he will forgive you for every one of them, and he will save you, if you want him to. Jesus would have loved him anyway, but in a peculiar way his heart was warmed by this young man's record. When he saw that here was an earnest, honest-hearted, sincere young man who had all his life honestly kept these things, his heart went out to him. It has never been recorded that Jesus ever loved a hypocrite or a liar. He saw the heart of this young man, and he knew that he was telling the truth.

The sixth thing about him is that he had a honest hunger for life. He came, the story says, and asked Jesus the question, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That is most interesting. Here is a young man who evidently had everything we think life needs, but he didn't yet have the one thing he hungered after. He lacked something, and he desired to have it. Be careful with what he said, that you might understand clearly just what he was asking Jesus. It is so easy for us to read this question of his as though he were asking, "Lord, now that I have everything in this life, what do I have to do to be sure of getting something in the next?" But that is not what he meant. To the Hebrew mind, this word eternal life does not mean what it has come to mean to us. To us it has come to mean everlasting life, life in heaven someday, but that is not what the phrase really means. It is much more than life that continues; it means life that satisfies---life that fulfills. That is what this young man was after. Oh, it is true that eternal life goes on forever, in heaven; but what he was asking was, "Lord, with what I have, how can I find what I don't have---that which really satisfies?"

Surely that indicates something about this young man. It indicates that with all that he had, he was conscious of lack. His youth was not satisfying him; his position could not command the thing his heart desired; his wealth could not buy for him the one thing he really wanted; his clean record was not enough to satisfy the ache and agony in his soul; his discernment could not penetrate the mystery of life and find the secret he was looking for. His courage was insufficient and his humility was not enough to open the door to the secret he wanted desperately to find; that which would leave his heart satisfied and keep it from being forever so restless.

In other words, this young man realized he was more than flesh, that the things he had could never satisfy the needs that were inside him---that he was made for something more. There was a cry in his soul for life. He wanted it. He was, in reality, aching for God. There was a great vacuum within which nothing he had, no matter how much it was, nor how the world would say that it was everything he needed, could ever meet in this young man's life. He was hungry for God.

I remember sitting down in a bus beside a high-school-age boy a number of years ago. We fell to talking about lots of things, among them, fear. I happened to mention something about the fear of death, because so many were being troubled with that. I shall never forget how he turned and looked at me, saying, "I'm not afraid to die." I have had many people say that to me, and I knew that at the time they said it they were trembling inside for fear they might die. But I believed that young man as he looked at me and said, "I'm not afraid to die." But then he went on to say, "But I'll tell you what I am afraid of. I'm afraid I'm going to waste my life." I think he expressed what many young people feel---a hunger for life---a desire to really live, to find that which will master them, will satisfy them, lay hold of them, make them feel complete and fulfilled. That is what brought this young man to Jesus.

It is to this young man Jesus said, "You lack one thing." What was it he lacked? Perhaps you read the story and say, "Well, he lacked poverty. That was his problem. He had too much money. What he needed to do was to get rid of his money." If you read it that way then I am afraid you have missed the point entirely. If that is what Jesus meant then this story has no application to most of us. No, that is not what he meant. That is not

what he lacked. I do not want to go away with that element in the story entirely, because put it there. He did say to him, "Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor." But he was not saying by that, "This is what you need; this is the thing you lack; you just have too much." No, his wealth was an obstacle that stood between this young man and the thing he needed. What he needed is revealed in what Jesus said to him in his final words, "Come, follow me."

That is what this young man lacked. As our Lord looked at him, he realized that this young man lacked a leader. That was his problem. He was his own final authority. He was his own boss, and that was what was eating at him. That was what was destroying him. He was the only one to whom he had to give account. This was wrecking his life.

Let me prove to you that this is what Jesus saw. Earlier, when this young man first came to him, Jesus asked him this strange question. "Why do you call me good? There is none good but God." Many people, reading that will say, "This is a denial on Jesus' part that he was God. He was saying to this young man, 'Do you call me good? There isn't anybody good but God, and I am not God so don't call me good.'" But look at that carefully. Think about it with me for a minute. Was he denying deity? He either meant that there is none good but God, and I am not good, therefore I am not God or he meant, there is none good but God but I am good, therefore, I am God. Either he was saying, "I am not God" or "I am not good."

Do you think he meant to say, "I am not good"? Do you think he was denying his goodness? Remember, this is the One who stood before his enemies and said, "Which of you convinces me of sin?" Everywhere he demonstrated that he knew what he was doing. As far as the record goes, he never made a mistake, never repented, never had to say he was sorry. He was worshipped by those who knew him best, as one without sin, and about him it is recorded by his closest follower, "In him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5), and by his most prominent disciple, "he committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips"(1 Peter 2:22).

What he was affirming to this young man was that he was God. He is saying, "Do you see me as good? Remember, there is none good but God." Link that with what he asked of this young ruler. Here was a young man who had everything, but one thing. Jesus put his finger on that lack when he implied, "What you need is a king and the only king a man ought to have is God. He is the only One who can fulfill and realize a young man's life, and bring the potential wrapped up in his being into fulfillment. That is what you need a God. Behold your king! Think through what you said to me. You saw goodness in me? Then what you saw was God. You call me good? Then, if you realize what you are saying, you are calling me God. Now, go and sell all that you have and give to the poor, and come and follow me. That is the one thing you lack."

There is only one King who can satisfy the human heart. If you young people bow down and follow some human leader, you will destroy yourselves. If you make an idol of some person---some movie star, some dramatic hero, some fictional character you will destroy yourselves; but if you discover the God who fulfills, who realizes human life. who adds and does not subtract, who multiplies and does not divide, you will have the thing that makes life full and complete. That is why Jesus said to this young man, "Come, and follow me." Here he is, with his strong personality, his clean record and his honest hunger, and yet Jesus is saying, "These things are not enough in themselves. You will never realize what you are looking for in these. You need a King, for no man can reign in life unless he first bows to serve his King. That is the secret of reigning."

But there was something standing in the way. There was something else that owned him, that possessed him, and he had to deal with that first. So Jesus said, "Now, go and sell all that you have. This is what is holding you to this self-centered life of yours. These things minister to your needs, to your self-centered desires. Therefore, deal with them harshly. Go cut them off. Sell them. Get rid of them, and come, and follow me."

We read, "At that saying, his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. " The most hopeful word here is that word sorrowful. Here is a young man who has stood face-to-face with the opportunity to live as God intended man to live. He had seen the glory of God's light and love flash and flame before him, and he went away sorrowful, because he didn't think he could afford it. It cost too much; "he had great possessions." Read that phrase again. Isn't that a remarkable statement, "He went away sorrowful, because he had great possessions." Measure that by the standards of the age in which we live. You say to me, "Men don't go away sorrowful when they have great possessions. If someone came to you and announced to

you that you have just won a sweepstakes and you now had a fortune of \$500,000, would you go away sorrowful?" My answer would be, "No, but you go away sorrowful when you have stood in the presence of Christ and heard him describe what could be yours if you would abandon your great possessions and you didn't." That is why he went away sorrowful.

I don't know what happened, finally, but I know it was one of two things. Either this young man went to his wealthy, luxurious home where he had everything material that his heart desired---beautiful rugs, tiled swimming pool, all the things that make a home luxurious---and he said to himself in the midst of all this, "I can't stand it any more. I don't want to live like this any more. It is too empty. There isn't anything worthwhile in it." And he called to his steward and said, "Add it all up and give it away." And he himself went and followed Christ.

He either did that, or else he went home and woke up the next morning and said, "What a fool I made of myself yesterday. Imagine! Bowing down to that peasant from Galilee. I don't know what possessed me. I thought for a while he was offering me something important but I know better now." And so he talked himself out of it. If he did that, I am sure the day came when he laughed at himself for his youthful naivete. His heart was hardened, and he went on to be nothing but a man of the world, soon losing all the fineness of his character and his personality. He had stood face-to-face with the possibilities of life, and said no to them.

But perhaps I do know what happened, after all. There is a section of the Gospel of Mark that has always fascinated me. It is found in the fourteenth chapter. Mark, in the course of telling the story of our Lord's journey to the cross, suddenly interjects two verses that seem to have nothing to do with the context at all, but which are reported only in Mark. In chapter 14, verse 51, as Jesus was led away by the soldiers to Pilate's judgment seat, Mark suddenly says,

"...and a young man followed him with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked."

Three things are most significant here: it was a young man; he was following Jesus; and he had nothing on but a linen cloth. I think I know that young man's name. It was Mark. This is his own story and this is why it appears only in Mark's gospel. Some think it was Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Some say it might have been Saul of Tarsus. Who knows? I think it was Mark.

But I know this. The Lord is dealing with some here---young men, young women, older men, older women. He is saying to you, "You have a good personality. Your friends like you. They enjoy you. You have a clean record. You have never done anything out of line. You have never shamed your parents or yourself. You have the possibilities of fame and fortune, of power and position, within you, but these things will never satisfy you. One thing you lack. You need a King. You need an Authority. You need a God to whom you can give yourself, who will master you, possess you. You can never properly exercise authority unless you are under authority, first. If you surrender yourself to him, he will make you reign. He will crown you with life---eternal life."

What do you say to that King? I don't know what he is saying to you first. I don't know the immediate thing he is saying. He may be saying to some of you, "First, go and sell what you have." I don't know. Only you know what he is saying about the preliminary. You must ask yourself, "What stands between me and Christ? Whatever it is, get rid of it. Sweep it away. Cut it off. Is it your right hand? Cut it off. Is it your right eye? Pluck it out. Get rid of it. It is too costly. It will keep you from the most important thing in your life. Get rid of it. But above all, come and follow him.

The glorious thing is that the younger you hear this voice of Jesus saying, "Come and follow me," the less you have to get rid of. If you do it young enough it is hardly a chore at all. It isn't painful then. It doesn't hurt like this young man felt it hurting. If you come when you are young, you can say, "Lord, here I am. I don't have much to leave, but what I had is gone. I have left whatever there is, and I have come to you."

I was only ten years old when I came to Christ, just a boy, in a meeting in the Red River Valley of North Dakota. I didn't have much to leave, but what it was, I left, and came to Christ. The next six months was one

of the happiest times of my boyhood. I can remember well the fellowship I had with the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, because I wasn't in a strong church where there was training provided, I began to drift. I moved away from North Dakota and got in with a crowd of companions who knew nothing of Christ and his Word. I failed to lay hold of the marvelous possibilities that were mine. But when I was twenty-one Jesus drew me back to himself, and I began to experience again the fulfillment of his promises. Now I can look back across the years and say that he has done what he promised. He has fulfilled, he has realized my life. He has given me eternal life.

What about some of you? Do you hear his voice tonight? Are you ready to say yes to him? Will you yield to your King? Will you own your God and follow your King wherever he wants to lead you---this most exciting, this most magnetic, most compelling Person who ever lived? Will you follow him?

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