

First Baptist Church of Augusta
Mark 10:17-31
Walt This Way: What's in It For Me?
August 10, 2008

I really do not like this passage. Oh, I know that is unbecoming for a minister to express a dislike for something found in the Bible, but I am simply being honest with you. I wish Jesus had said, "Make a generous financial donation to the charity of your choice," or "go and do fifty push-ups, say the Lord's Prayer twice, and enroll in a seminary extension course." But he didn't. Instead Jesus 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.***"

Now I know that Jesus was not making a sweeping declaration for all followers everywhere to sell everything and become monastics or hermits. We can make the argument that Jesus was speaking to *this* man at *that* time and it was what *he* lacked in following Jesus. Sure, I know that this was not a commandment or even a suggestion for everybody everywhere.

What troubles me, however, is what would I do if Jesus were to ask me to sell what I own and give away my money to the poor? What would you do? I can tell you that my response would probably not be much different than the man. I am afraid I would walk away, sick at heart, because I have a house, cars, an iPod, and a retirement account, that I just am not sure I can live without.

I preached on Matthew's version of this passage a couple of years ago, so I will try not to repeat myself (I am certain you all remember the sermon verbatim). My approach then was to focus on the financial perspective of the text. The sermon was along the lines of the stress of excess, the pressures of materialism of owning possessions or being owned by possessions, and so forth.

There is actually more to this encounter than materialism getting in the way of following Jesus. For this message, let us consider the perspective of "what is in it for me" when it comes to following Jesus.

The question of the man is simple and straight-forward: *what must I do to inherit eternal life?*

Initially there is really nothing wrong with the question. Eternal life is a primal quest, and so no one seems to be really surprised by the question. My earliest memories of revival meetings recall the messages being centered on eternal life. "Where will you go on that great getting-up morning?! To the Pearly Gates of God's eternal bliss, or to the fiery pits of Hell, reserved for Satan and Sinners?!" Do you want to get sanctified or French-fried? Turn or Burn? Get right or get left?

You know the drill. In some measure this was what the man was asking of Jesus: *what must I do to inherit eternal life?*

What should surprise us, however, is what he did not ask Jesus. He did not ask:

How can I be one of your followers?
What must I do to be a disciple?
How can I serve you? Or even...
How can I serve my neighbor?

His question – *what must I do to inherit eternal life* – is essentially a self-centered question. "What's in it for me?"

While we did not read the subsequent conversation, it is germane to the story. Peter has watched this dialogue between Jesus and the rich man, and later he engages Jesus by saying in verse 28, and here I am

paraphrasing: “You know Jesus, as I think about it, we *have* left everything for you. We left our fishing boats. We left our families. We left our security. We left everything. What do we get out of this? What is in it for me?”

What question are we asking this morning?

I once heard Tony Campolo in a sermon state: If there was no guarantee for an after life would you still follow Jesus?

When I checked the scriptures, eternal life as a phrase, is not even in the Old Testament. There are 42 verses in the New Testament. In the synoptic gospels, I found that the issue of eternal life is not even addressed until this rich man asks about it. In Matthew, the story does not come until chapter 19 (out of 28 chapters), in Luke, it is chapter 10, and here in Mark, it comes also at chapter 10. This story comes long after Jesus has already invited people to follow him without any promise of reward.

I am certainly not making an argument against eternal life, for Jesus does speak and teach about it, especially in the Gospel of John. What I am pressing for this morning, is to engage the question, “Why am I a Christian?” or “Why am I a follower of Jesus?”

For some, perhaps many, the answer is sincerely: “Because I wanted to secure my salvation, I want to go to heaven.” Brothers and sisters, there is nothing wrong with seeking assurance that this life is not all that there is. We may go on following Jesus, because that is the way we are raised, our parents have influenced us or we do not want to disappoint our circle of friends. There are all kinds of reasons people call themselves Christians, many of which are sincere and valid, but I suspect behind many of the reasons, it is because we want the assurance that when we die, God has a plan.

I believe, however, there must be more to it than securing a place in the hereafter. Growing in our discipleship, answering the call to walk the way of Jesus, takes us beyond the question, *what is in it for me?*

What question could you ask this morning? “What is in it for me?” or “Where do you want me to go?”

Of course, there is something in it for us. Jesus says in verses 29 and 30: *Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age-- houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions-- and in the age to come eternal life.*

Our temptation may be to twist this text and place it into an accounting spreadsheet. I am certain this was not what Jesus had in mind. Rather, the call to follow, implies a trust that we release the iron-clad grip we have for our own personal happiness, success and pleasure so that God can give to us so much more.

I have a quote from one of my favorite authors taped onto my laptop computer. It was given to me by Dr. Mercer Bridges. The quote is from Joseph Campbell: “We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”

When I was 18, I was sitting in church, like many of these students preparing to leave for college. My life was planned out. In a matter of weeks into my summer, following graduation, I would be moving to art school and begin my journey in commercial art. I was leaving the farm, glory hallelujah, and I was master of my fate. Yet, four months later, I was back on the farm feeling like a failure. Over the years, the cycle has repeated itself: I cling tenaciously to my plans, only to realize there was something else that was not in my agenda. This is not a testimonial of health and wealth, but recognition that God has much to give in this life, but we cannot fully realize it, if all we are doing is hanging on to ourselves.

My friend Scott Walker writes: “Wise men and women have been saying for centuries that when you make finding happiness the major goal of life, we will never be happy. Happiness is not a goal to be discovered, achieved or obtained. Rather, happiness is the by-product of a life well lived.” (*Footsteps of the Fisherman*, p. 68)

Some of you mothers and fathers right now, are thinking that you would feel a lot happier if your little boy or girl would just stay home, never grow up, not move away to college, not get married – you know, perpetually, remain young, and so, you too, would be young. But, there is a beautiful life waiting to be lived, and not just for your child. God has more for us, but we will need to follow, to walk, and forget about the question, “What’s in it for me.” The truth is, one can scarcely comprehend the answer.

Time and again, the gospels remind us that when we lose our life we will find it, when we leave behind personal happiness we enter into joy, when we give our lunch away, a multitude is fed, and when we cease manipulating our way towards what is in it for me, we discover what it means to be richly blessed.

One of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, penned a poem entitled “When Death Comes.” From time to time I read it at funerals. Listen to her words this morning, especially her last line.

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut; when death comes
like the measles-pox; when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,
I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,
and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

The call of the Gospel, to follow this one named Jesus. It is an invitation not to visit the world clinging fearfully to our tokens of security. We are invited to live in this world giving ourselves completely away that we may discover one-hundredfold what God has for us.

Growing in our walk with God, we find ourselves echoing the words of the aged John who wrote in 1 John 4:19: *We love, because he first loved us.*