

## **Title: Counting the Cost of Following Christ**

Perhaps you've seen a TV ad in which a person answers the door and finds someone who hands over a check for an enormous amount of money. Then, the amazed recipient begins shouting, dancing, jumping, and hugging everyone in sight. "I won! I'm rich! I can't believe it! My problems are solved!"

There is no denying that striking it rich arouses jubilation. But our Gospel today reveals a dark side to riches that is thought-provoking and troublesome. As the story of the Rich Young Ruler unfolds, a conflict is manifested in this rich man's soul as he sorrowfully walks away. Its heartbreaking dynamics make it one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. Its message is so vital that we find it in three of the four Gospels. Luke's account identifies the man as a ruler.<sup>1</sup> Matthew's account tells us that he was young.<sup>2</sup> Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that he had great possessions and was extremely wealthy.<sup>3</sup>

But no matter how we might identify him, the story's point is the same: wealth has an important role, but it also has its problematic challenges. It was true for him, and it is also true for us.

Mark tells us that this man *"ran up to Jesus and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"*<sup>4</sup>

In response to his question, Jesus recites the commandments. When the man responds, *"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 all that you have, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.'"*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:18

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:20

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 19:22 and Mark 10:22 (Luke 18:23 says "He was extremely wealthy.")

<sup>4</sup> Mark 10:17

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:20-21

Few words in Holy Scripture have gotten more attention than this particular instruction, and all kinds of interpretations have been proposed. Wealth usually carries with it notoriety and privilege. The religious culture in which Jesus lived viewed wealth as a sign of God's favor. The Law of Moses declared, ***"The Lord, your God, is he who gives you the power to get wealth."***<sup>6</sup> But it was never to be seen as a sure sign of God's special favor. The last of the Ten Commandments warns against covetousness; other verses tell us about our responsibility for its compassionate use.

Therefore, our Gospel today reverses the expectations, rewards, and values of wealth, which had become confused and generally accepted by the religious culture of his day.

Then Mark tells us, *"Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!'"*<sup>7</sup> These words were perplexing because they seemed to turn the false expectations about wealth upside-down. Then he added to the disciple's astonishment by saying, ***"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."***<sup>8</sup>

As Jesus said these things, he addressed his disciples as "children."<sup>9</sup> The term reminded them of a former time when he told them how the kingdom might be entered, even by becoming as little children: lowly, dependent, and willing to receive all at the hands of their parents.

This past weekend, Ellen and I were taking care of our grandchildren. Molly, who is nine years old, read a favorite story about children from a book she had picked up from the library.

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<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 8:18

<sup>7</sup> Mark 10:23

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:25

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:23

The title of the chapter was “What I know about little kids.” The writer, speaking from a mother’s point of view, said,

“When kids are little, their brains are like brand-new sponges—Everything they see or hear soaks up into their brain and stays up there forever. That’s why kids are so good at learning new stuff—their brain sponges are new. When a sponge is new, it’s really soft and excellent at holding stuff. When a sponge is old and used, it no longer works so well. (If grown-ups are not careful,) they can become like old sponges that are already full and don’t have room for anything new.”<sup>10</sup>

Jesus had a tender, compassionate look when he referred to his disciples as children. He knew his demands were challenging, but he had repeatedly communicated that following him comes at a cost. Yet, he said these things as one ***“who can sympathize with our weaknesses but was in every respect tested as we are, yet without sin,”***<sup>11</sup> as our New Testament lesson today reminds us.

There are numerous questions many of you may have concerning stewardship, especially since I have recently announced my retirement. I can’t answer those questions, but I am confident that God’s love and grace will “precede and follow you,” as our opening prayer suggests. And as you ask for wisdom, remember the promise from our New Testament lesson from Hebrew that encourages you to ***“approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that you may receive the mercy and grace your time of need.”***<sup>12</sup>

The following story illustrates how such grace operates:

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<sup>10</sup> Chaise Mericle Harper, “Just Grace and Double Surprise,” copyright 2011, p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 4:15

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 4:16 paraphrased

In May of 1890, the city of Edinburgh, Scotland, buzzed with excitement. For many months, crews had been building the longest cantilever bridge in the world – a record the bridge still holds. Today, It is known as Scotland’s “Forth Bridge,” the world’s first major steel structure.<sup>13</sup> It required two work crews stationed on opposite sides of the bay to build this colossal structure. Thousands of people came from all over Europe to witness the final step in the process – joining the two sides of the bridge into one. But to everyone’s horror, the two sides wouldn’t come together. It seemed that all the impressive workforce and machinery had failed. But then the clouds drifted, and the sun shone down on the bay. As the bright sunshine warmed the cold steel, the bridge’s sections slowly yielded to all the pulling and came together. Great cheers accompanied the historic joining of the bridge. All the efforts of the people working on the bridge were not enough to complete the job. The sun had to come out and do what human hands could not.

The same can be said about human hearts. Our Gospel notes, “***Jesus looked at this man and loved him.***”<sup>14</sup> That love was like the sun shining upon that cold steel that couldn’t fit into place until the sun’s warmth shone upon it. You, too, may find yourself stuck and perplexed about your stewardship responsibility. The questions our Gospel raises are many. We all have ambitions, obsessions, and love of other things that hinder us from loving God. But remember that when Jesus said, “**Go...sell...give...come...follow,**” it was a call to freedom that comes from living in a relationship with God and others. You have something vital to give to this grand affair of building God’s kingdom. So, let’s rise to the occasion and come to the promised feast of joy. *Amen.*

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<sup>13</sup> See website for: [Forth Bridge | The Forth Bridges](#)

<sup>14</sup> Mark 10:21 paraphrased

## **Reflection Questions:**

- What are the gifts God has given you?
- What is God's hope for their use?
- What ambition, obsession, or love of other things keeps you from loving God?