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How to Inherit Eternal Life

Biblical Reflection for 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, OCT. 7, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Mark's Gospel story of Jesus' encounter with the man seeking eternal life is essentially a vocation story (Mark 10:17-30). It is the only story in Mark in which the individual called responds not by following, but by going away.

The story is narrated in all three Synoptic Gospel accounts. Matthew (19:16-22) tells us that the man was young; only Luke (18:18-23) tells us he was ruler. The three evangelists agree that the man was rich, and in Mark, this is the only description given. The rich man's concern is to "inherit eternal life."

Let us consider several aspects of Mark's account of the Gospel episode. First of all, Jesus repudiates the term "good" for himself and directs it to God, the source of all goodness, who alone can grant the gift of eternal life.

Is Jesus' directive to this man with many possessions a requirement for all who wish to inherit eternal life? Is it true that Jesus did not ask other disciples to sell their possessions (1 Tim 6:17-19)? Wasn't Peter able to keep his house and boat for a short period of time (Mark 1:29; John 21:3)? Didn't the women of Galilee continue to have access to their personal, material resources (Mark 15:41), just as Joseph of Arimathea did (15:43)?

It seems that in the case of this man with many possessions in Mark's story, Jesus issued a very personal invitation for very specific reasons. Why does this young man find the teaching of Jesus so difficult to accept? In the Old Testament, wealth and material goods are considered a sign of God's favor (Job 1:10; Psalm 128:1-2; Isaiah 3:10).

Religious Jews believed that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Rich people were regarded as those God had blessed, and poor people were regarded as those God had cursed.

Power of possessions

The words of Jesus in Mark 10:23-25 provoke astonishment among the disciples because of their apparent contradiction with the Old Testament concept (Mark 10:24,26). Since wealth, power, and merit generate false security, Jesus rejects them utterly as a claim to enter the kingdom. The negative outcome of the man's choice to walk away strikes a note of realism.

It also attests the special power of possessions to hinder Christian discipleship. Jesus uses the rich man's departure as a teaching moment to instruct his disciples about the dangerous snare that earthly possessions, success and prosperity can have. Total detachment from one's possessions is required of every authentic disciple. Jesus saw the danger of material possessions. They can fix our heart to the world and make us think

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of everything in terms of price rather than value.

Jesus was trying to completely overturn what the apostles and all other good Jews had been taught. But his teaching on wealth and richness was incomprehensible to the listeners. When Jesus said, "how hard it would be for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God" the Gospel says, "They, the disciples, were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" (v.26).

Anyone of us would naturally ask the same question! Jesus reminded them that salvation is purely a gift from God. Grace is God's gift and only those whose arms and hands are empty of self can stretch out to receive the gift of grace. The achievement of salvation is beyond human capability and depends solely on the goodness of God who offers it as a gift (Mark 10:27).

A Christian contradiction

In many societies, wealth is a sign of God's approval, and poverty and hardship are the signs of God's disapproval. Every Christian is challenged by the teaching of Jesus and the values of the society, which upholds the principle that worth really does come from material wealth; for example from the number of cars we own, the size of our homes, the amount in our investment portfolios.

When capitalist systems are solely market-driven, heartless, and materialistic, they contradict the Gospel teachings of Jesus. The Gospel of Jesus challenges the "prosperity gospel mentality." Jesus is not speaking against material wealth, but condemns being enslaved to and enchained by wealth. It becomes a blessing when it is shared with others, and it becomes an obstacle and a prison for those who do not have the wisdom to share it with others.

As Jesus looked at the rich young man, he looks at each one of us with love. He is reminding us to do "one thing more." We have to allow his loving gaze penetrate us to the core, and unlike the young man we must open ourselves to transform our lives, upset our values and rearrange our priorities.

When, considering his language too demanding, many of his disciples left him, Jesus asked the few who had remained: "Will you also go away?"

Peter answered him: "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:67-68).

And they chose to remain with him. They stayed because the Master had "the words of eternal life," words that promised eternity and also gave full meaning to life here and now.

Wisdom and happiness

King Solomon, as seen in the first reading (Wisdom 7:7-11), realized that only true wisdom could bring happiness. He prayed for it and it alone, rather than power, riches, health or good looks. God gave him everything.

For us, wisdom has become a person and his name is Jesus. Wisdom was born in a manger and died on a cross, and in between said that our only shot at ever being filled up is if we follow him in the life of self-emptying love.

Looking at Jesus, we see what it means to be poor in spirit, gentle and merciful, to mourn, to care for what is right, to be pure in heart, to make peace, to be persecuted. This is why he has the right to say to each of us, "Come, follow me!"

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He does not say simply, "Do what I say." He says, "Come, follow me!"

In the end, Jesus looks intently and lovingly at each one of us and reminds us that life is to be had in its fullness not by accumulating things, honors, privileges, reputations, and prestige, but by letting go of things.

Initially, his invitation might surprise, upset, shock, and grieve us. With God's grace, may we realize Jesus' word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart (Hebrews 4:12-13). Hopefully, we will not go away sad.

Ordinary life

Following today's Gospel, I encourage you to consider three important teachings of our Catholic tradition, from the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Benedict XVI's most recent encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate."

1) The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches (2404-2405) that our material goods are entrusted to us by God not for our own personal advantage but for the privilege of using them for the good of others. "The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence, with the task of making it fruitful and communicating its benefits to others, first of all his family. Goods of production -- material or immaterial -- such as land, factories, practical or artistic skills, oblige their possessors to employ them in ways that will benefit the greatest number. Those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation, reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor."

2) "The second truth is that ... authentic human development concerns the whole of the person in every single dimension. Without the perspective of eternal life, human progress in this world is denied breathing space. Enclosed within history, it runs the risk of being reduced to the mere accumulation of wealth; humanity thus loses the courage to be at the service of higher goods, at the service of the great and disinterested initiatives called forth by universal charity.

"Man does not develop through his own powers, nor can development simply be handed to him. In the course of history, it was often maintained that the creation of institutions was sufficient to guarantee the fulfillment of humanity's right to development" (No. 11 Caritas in Veritate).

3) "While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human. God reveals man to himself; reason and faith work hand in hand to demonstrate to us what is good, provided we want to see it; the natural law, in which creative Reason shines forth, reveals our greatness, but also our wretchedness insofar as we fail to recognize the call to moral truth." (No. 75 Caritas in Veritate).

[The readings for the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Wisdom 7:7-11; Hebrew 4:12-13; and Mark 10:17-30 or 10:17-27]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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