Seek and you will find

Text: Mark 10:17-27

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:1-17; Galatians 3:24; 2 Kings 5:9-14; Matthew 7:7-8; Mark 10:17-27

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 139, 441, 509, 431, 180

**Series:** The Gospel of Mark (#33)

**Theme:** After a rich young ruler eagerly and earnestly seeks eternal life but then goes away disheartened when called to abandon his many material possessions, Jesus explains the impossibility of entering the Kingdom of God by human merit.

**Proposition:** Abandon whatever is necessary in order to put Christ first in your life.

**Introduction**

There’s a song by the Irish rock band U2 which has become immensely popular. You might know the title ‘*I still haven’t found what I am looking for*’. The lyrics speak of a person who is searching mountains, fields, and has experienced many things yet remains unsatisfied because he … you heard it… still hasn’t found what he is looking for.

Sometimes in life we may be seeking what we really need but when faced with the cost we decide not to commit, but rather to do without. That may well make sense with many things, but not with eternal life lived in never-ending peace, joy and satisfaction. Eternal life is the very best life you can have in this world and the only life you can have in the new world yet to come. Such a life is worth everything as Jesus illustrated with the parable of the pearl merchant who sold everything in order to have one pearl of great value. The truth is that eternal life costs us nothing, but does require any who would seek such a prize to put Christ first and foremost above all else in their life; that is the essence of saving faith.

In our text from Mark’s gospel this morning a man comes to Jesus seeking eternal life. In a sense he does find what he is looking for, yet he is not willing to put God first in his life, so he remains unsatisfied. He was an earnest seeker after eternal life, yet even though he did find what he was looking he was not willing to give up what he had to gain Christ.

Jesus says, ‘*seek and you will find*’ (Matt 7:7). Have you found what you are looking for from Him? To help each of us to answer that question for ourselves, let’s look at our text under three headings:

1. An earnest seeker
2. A lost seeker
3. A saved seeker
4. **An earnest seeker (v17-20)**

Most of you know that I like running. I almost always do this in shorts and a tee-shirt. However, it might surprise you to know that I have run in a suit like this one I am wearing now. On a few occasions I have literally run after people who have left the church building straight after the service because I’ve urgently wanted to speak to them and sometimes to encourage them to stay for some fellowship. Seeing someone running in a suit looks a little strange and, in times past, might even have been thought to be undignified for a minister of the gospel. How much more for the man who, Mark records in our text, ‘*ran up*’ to Jesus (v17).

We can gain a broad understand about who this man was when we combine details from the three accounts of this event from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. He was ‘extremely rich’ (Luke 18:23), having ‘great possessions’ (Matt 19:22). He was a ‘ruler’ (Matt 18:18) and he was ‘young’ (Matt 19:22). Putting the three accounts together results in the composite title which is often used ‘rich young ruler’. It is likely that he was one of the officials in charge of the local synagogue.

He was clearly a devout Jew who not only respected the commandments of God, but had sought diligently to obey them from his youth – likely a reference to his twelfth birthday. Here was a very wealthy, deeply religious person of high social standing publicly doing what would be highly undignified in that culture: he was running to meet Jesus. He would most likely have ‘girded up his loins’ (Prov 31:17), tucking his robes into his belt in order to move at speed towards Jesus. Notice then that he does not come to Christ by night with no one to observe him, as Nicodemus ‘a man of the Pharisees’ did (John 3:2). He came in full sight of the disciples and others, urgently and earnestly seeking what he did not have, eternal life. We might expect such a man to approach Jesus as an equal – recognizing Christ as another deeply religious man, a Rabbi. But no, He comes and kneels before Jesus in deep humility and reverence.

Before we go any further, notice that there is so much to commend this earnest seeker. He has come to the right person; Jesus who alone is the ‘*way, the truth and the life*’ (John 14:6). He knows that he urgently needs what he doesn’t have – eternal life. He is a moral man who has earnestly sought to obey God’s commandments. His attitude is genuinely humble and deeply respectful. Perhaps these are some of the reasons why Jesus ‘loved him’ (v21). It is good to earnestly, urgently and humble seek the Giver of Life.

Remember that Jesus said “*Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened*” (Matt 7:7-8). As we will shortly see, Jesus will give this man what he asks for. He will lovingly tell this man exactly what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Yet, this earnest seeker will go away empty-handed; still lacking what he needed above all else. There is a sober warning for all who will listen here.

In and of itself, earnestly and urgently seeking the words of eternal life (John 6:68) does not give you what you are looking for unless you believe those words and desire to live by them. Being an upright moral person who seriously seeks to obey God’s commandments; not to murder, not to commit adultery, not to steal and not to bear false witness, not to defraud others and to honour your father and mother does not give you what you ultimately need.

You can be sincerely religious, perhaps thinking that your material blessings are a sure sign that you are saved, and yet you can be outside the Kingdom of God. You can be a prominent member of the church, perhaps serving as an elder, deacon or minister, earnestly coming to congregational worship services twice every Sunday and yet still not receive what you desperately need: eternal life. The sad truth from our text this morning is that this earnest seeker of Christ was found to be a lost seeker, which brings us to our second point:

1. **A lost seeker (v21-22)**

We’ve already seen that there was much to commend the rich young ruler. There are, however, some troublesome details about this man. The very first word he uses to address Jesus reveals a problem. He says, “Good Teacher” (v17). To which Jesus replies “*Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone*” (v18). To be very clear: Jesus is not here denying His own identity as the divine Son of God who is, like His heavenly Father, perfectly good. Rather, Jesus was challenging and correcting the man’s understanding of what it means to be good.

Despite the kneeling man’s humble reverence for Jesus, it seems that this rich young ruler saw himself as he saw the man Jesus: a good person. If you asked him ‘are you a good person’ he would likely reply with a confident ‘yes’. In his eyes he had perfectly kept all the commandments of God that he lists from his youth. There are two problems with his understanding of God’s Law.

**Firstly**, he only lists the commandments 5-10 from what is called the ‘second table of the law’ – dealing with the relationships between human beings. He does not mention the first four commandments – ‘the first table of the law’ – dealing with our relationship to God.

**Secondly**, he understands obedience to the commandments of God to be only that of outward action, not of inner heart motivation. This is contrary to God’s revelation in the Old Testament (e.g. Deut 10:16; 30:16; Jer 4:4), as well as to the teaching of Christ in the New Testament (e.g. Matt 5:21-30).

This is why he calls Jesus ‘good’ and thinks that he has met God’s covenantal requirement for perfect obedience. Even the way he frames his question to Jesus shows that he does not understand how to inherit eternal life. He says, ‘*What must I* ***do*** *to inherit eternal life?*’ (v17). Here is a man full of what he understands are ‘good works’, yet his heart is troubled, what more could God require of him? He is like the anguished Martin Luther climbing the Scala Sancta steps in Rome on his knees seeking to do sufficient religious duties in order to be saved. Luther later wrote “*Although I was a holy and irreproachable monk, my conscience was full of trouble and anguish*”.

Jesus’s reply to the rich young ruler is surprising because Christ gives him exactly what he asks for – something he needed to do. Here is what Jesus said, “*You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me*.” (Mark 10:21). Ah ha! There we have it – the ‘secret’ to eternal life, get rid of all your material possessions. Be like a Benedictine monk and make a vow of poverty and you will be saved! No! It would be a grave error to take the particular instruction of Jesus to this man and generalize it to all people.

Money and/or material possessions are not in their essence a barrier to eternal life, but putting them first in your life is (1 Tim 6:10). In His sermon on the Mount, Jesus said “*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money*” (Matt 6:24). If Jesus was having the same type of conversation with Pontius Pilate, what might he say? Perhaps something like “*Don’t be a crowd pleaser, leave your political ambitions behind, and come, follow me*”. Jesus called Saul of Tarsus to stop persecuting His church, and to go to Damascus to await further instructions. As we know well, Paul became a faithful follower of Christ instead of a zealous Pharisee who mistakenly thought he was doing good works.

Different people have different obstacles which prevent them from following Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Ultimately, anything or anybody which, or who, has first priority in your life is an idol. In the second commandment God effectively says, ‘Me first, above all else’. This truth is expressed in Isaiah 42:8 **“***I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other*”. For some people their idol is their physical, emotional or mental comfort. For some people, their idol is gaining and maintaining the approval of others. For others it is having power and control. For others, like this rich young ruler, it is their material wealth.

At any particular time in our lives there can be an idol of the heart that tempts us by effectively saying ‘*put your trust in me first and foremost, worship me first and rely on me most*’. Where are your particular weaknesses and vulnerabilities here? A helpful way to answer this personal and probing question is to self-diagnose and ask yourself: “*What or who would I be most distressed to loose in my life?*” If your answer is anything other than ‘Jesus Christ my Lord and Saviour’, then you are in essence like the rich young ruler in our text.

When he received exactly what he had earnestly and urgently come to find – the answer to his question ‘*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*’ you might expect him to be full of joy. Instead Mark records that he was ‘*disheartened by the saying*’ and ‘*went away sorrowful*’ (v22). The Greek word translated ‘disheartened’ is used to describe an overcast sky, dark and threatening, in Matt 16:3. The Greek word translated ‘sorrowful’ conveys severe mental and emotional distress, like that of Peter when Jesus asked him a third time ‘do you love me?’ (John 21:17). Here was a man who was lost, even though he had received the answer from Jesus that he needed to hear. His reaction to what Jesus said was somewhat like that of Naaman the leper who went away angry from Elisha because what he was told to do was not what he had expected. Naaman later did as he had been told and dipped himself even times in the river Jordan and was healed of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:14)

Some have suggested that because Mark records that Jesus loved the rich young ruler (v21), and God’s saving love is only for His elect that this seeker must have turned to follow Jesus at a later time. This is possible, but to base an assurance of his future salvation on a confusion between the response of Christ in His humanity and the sovereign electing love of God would be an error. So we are left at the end of this brief encounter between Christ and an earnest seeker after eternal life with a disheartened, sorrowful man who does not follow Jesus, but instead goes away just as lost as when he came. The question then remains, ‘*well, if such a sincere outwardly moral man, commendable in so many ways was not saved, then who can be?*’ This brings us to our third point.

1. **A saved seeker (v25-27)**

Our focus now follows the account that Mark gives as we move beyond the rich young ruler to the lesson that Jesus gives to his disciples and today, through His Word, to us. Jesus says: “*How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*” Notice that Jesus does not say ‘*wealthy people cannot enter the kingdom of God*’. We know, for example, that Joseph of Arimathea was a rich disciple of Jesus (Matt 27:57). Lydia, a seller of costly purple goods in the city of Thyatira came to faith in Christ (Acts 16:14). Many churches, like this one, are blessed to have materially wealthy members who faithfully and sacrificially contribute to the needs of the church through their giving. Wealth is not necessarily a barrier preventing entry into the Kingdom of God, but it can be and quite often is. Why is that?

It is because material possessions do provide a degree of physical security in life. A person with money in the bank or saleable assets like property or vehicles will be more financially resilient in the face of unexpected circumstances. It is easy for a wealthy person to trust more and more in what they have. It is easy for a wealthy person to seek more wealth so that they can feel more secure. This was the situation of the foolish man in the parable that Jesus taught who built bigger barns for himself to store more crop wealth so that he would have ‘*ample goods laid up for many years*’, enabling him, he thought, to ‘*relax, eat, drink and be merry*’ (Luke 12:13-21).

Jesus drives his lesson home to His amazed disciples, whom He refers to here as ‘Children’ by repeating his words ‘*how difficult it is to enter the Kingdom of heaven*’. He then gives an illustration to help them to understand, saying: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*” (v25). This is a well-known Scripture, and you might well be aware that some people have suggested that Jesus was speaking here about a relatively small gate in Jerusalem called the ‘needle’ which a camel would have difficulty getting through.

The message is much more direct and straightforward than that. Adult male Arabian camels are about 2m tall and 4m in length. Even large needles designed for a thick thread only have an eye a few millimetres in width. The clear message is that it is utterly impossible for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle. That was a shock to the disciples. Mark records that they were ‘*exceedingly astonished*’ (v26). If it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God ‘*then who can be saved?*’ (v26). Then Jesus looked at His disciples and said “*With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God*” (v27).

Nobody, no matter how materially wealthy or poor, no matter how moral or immoral, no matter how religious or non-religious can gain entry for themselves into the Kingdom of God. It is impossible for anyone, you and I included, to inherit eternal life through anything we do, no matter how good our works may seem to us and/or to other people to be. The perfectly holy kingdom of Christ, the Holy One of God, is no place for unholy people – people like us who break both the first and second table of the law at times. Our hearts manufacture more idols than we care to admit. Our lives, upon close scrutiny are not fully obedient to God’s good commands.

How then can a person who earnestly seeks eternal life be saved? By trusting in Christ alone and not in their wealth, health, status, family, friends or even church and in good spiritual disciplines such as the study of God’s Word, prayer and worship. Christ truly is the ‘Good Teacher’. He is perfectly good as only God is, and He lovingly teaches the truth graciously.

Where do you stand in relation to Christ today? Perhaps you have come to this worship service thinking of yourself as being an acceptably good person; moral, religious and yet deep down inside you know that you lack something? Perhaps you have come because you know that you have failed to obey God’s commandments again and again. You are miserable inside because you have lost hope in yourself? Perhaps God’s Word has shown you today that there is something or somebody in your life that or who has a higher priority for you than Jesus Christ?

Whoever you are, whatever your situation today, you, I, need to come eagerly, earnestly and urgently to Christ and ask, ‘*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*’. How do I need to change in order to put God first in my life? What sacrifice do I need to make in order to put my trust wholly in Christ? What do I need to deny myself? What cross do I need to take up so that I can follow Jesus? (Matt 16:24).

Trust God that He will answer such questions, asked with a humble, submissive heart. By His Holy Spirit, He will convict you (John 16:8) and guide you into all the truth (John 16:12). Abandon whatever is necessary in order to put Christ first in your life. Find and keep what you are looking for to meet your deepest needs. Do not leave this place as the rich young man left Jesus, as a lost seeker. Instead leave as a saved seeker who follows Jesus because He alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

AMEN.