NOT A FAN--“What Must I Do?”
Mark 10:17-31 / October 21, 2012 / Pastor Dennis Carlson

The story of the Rich Young Ruler is told in all three of synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark & Luke. We have just heard it read from Mark’s version, though the differences of the three accounts are really rather minor. I don’t know about you, but when I first hear this narrative read, I don’t like it! That’s not being sacrilegious. It’s just being honest. [And just as a side bar, it’s OK to be honest with God. You know what? He can handle it! In fact there’s a LOT of “Honest to God” in the Psalms, which we refer to as Psalms of lament, among other places in Scripture itself.] Here are some of the reasons why I am “Not a Fan” of this passage.

1-Jesus seems to be too coy in his opening exchange. (v.17-18) The Rich Young Ruler comes rushing up to him, falls on his knees and asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Oh, by the way, if his sprinting abilities weren’t enough to so indicate, it is Matthew’s Gospel that tells us he was “young” and Luke that tells us that he was a “ruler”, and in all three, he is evidently wealthy, hence, “The Rich Young Ruler” as we have come to know him. “What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?” Now I think that is a pretty good question. Even Kyle Idleman in this week’s video says as much. Now Jesus will go on to answer the question—well, sort of, kind of, as Jesus is wont to do—but he never really says, “AH, NOW THAT IS A VERY GOOD QUESTION?!” I am so glad you asked it! He doesn’t seem to encourage this TEACHABLE MOMENT. Instead Jesus has kind of a cagey remark—answering a question by ASKING another question, which he is always very good at doing, too…—saying, “Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God.” Couldn’t he be a little more forthright than that? Personally, I don’t care for his answer.

2-Secondly, Jesus doesn’t seem to give the young man enough credit for the good guy that he was. (v.19-20) Jesus lists off practically the entire second half of the Ten Commandments and this guy has kept them all. Isn’t that good for something? Come on, Jesus, give the guy a break! Don’t be so hard on him! If we had kids like this guy in our public schools, the world would definitely be a better place. If we had kids like this in our SUNDAY SCHOOL and YOUTH GROUPS… Well, wouldn’t we all be glad to have our kids hanging around him!!

3-Thirdly, along those lines, I kind of like this guy and yet, Jesus seems to just let him walk away from the Kingdom of God. “Jesus, aren’t you going to go after him? Can’t you try a little harder to reel this guy in? I mean you’ve got him on the line! Don’t just let him get away! I mean this Rich Young Ruler—He’d be featured in the Forbes magazine’s article on “Forty Future Leaders Under the Age of Forty.” He’d be on the cover of People magazine! I picture him to be tall, dark and handsome. Everything, I am NOT (but I still find him very likable) I picture him kind of like… like, Kyle Idleman! But just to let this guy walk away?! Seriously, as Pastor of Evangelism, I truly agonize when folks just walk away from the church. It’s MY JOB to bring in new folks AND retain them! I mean, NUMBERS are important, aren’t they? But regardless of numbers, I don’t want to see people turn away from God’s path. I want to do everything I can, practically running after them to encourage them to stay. Jesus, you are not giving me a very good model to follow here!

4-And then finally, it’s the whole money thing! Jesus seems to be meddling in talking so strongly about wealth to this rich man. Especially the command to give it all away that sends him walking! Now I’m not the richest guy on the block, but this touches pretty close to home for me. Compared to the rest of world, I know I am in the top ten percent. I am a little uncomfortable with these words. Besides, Jesus—we can use guys like this in our churches! We still haven’t paid off the new roof we had put on earlier this year. And I still think we need a better sign out
front… What’s that going to cost? And there we go again—it’s the worst stereotype out there of preachers always talking about money. But how can I preach a text like this and NOT say something about money?!

In short, I am “Not A Fan” of this text! Sometimes Pastor Ken jokes about giving me all of the hard texts… Hmm? [Hey Ken, Could I please see YOU in MY office tomorrow morning at 9am?! ☺] But let’s first see if we can’t sort out some of these question, some honest critique or issues that we may have with the passage as it seems to be.

1-Perceived & Real Identities – There are several angles by which we can try to better understand the opening exchange between Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler. This is the only place in the gospels where Jesus is addressed as, “Good teacher.” So that is a little unusual for starters. Matthew’s account has a very slight word variation in the opening question that also sheds a bit of light. In Matthew’s gospel, the man’s question is, “What GOOD THING must I do in order to inherit eternal life?” By the man’s response later on claiming to have kept all of the commandments, he obviously THINKS he is a pretty GOOD guy! Kind of like, “I’m OK, you’re OK,” on steroids. It’s almost as if the guy is kind of buttering up Jesus, while currying his favor in being such a good guy. So it is almost as if Jesus is saying, “Do you really even know what GOOD is? Indeed, it is a high and even holy characteristic—as in God’s daily pronouncement of his created order, declaring the original creation as all GOOD. “If you think you’re a pretty GOOD person, do you meet God’s benchmark?” And especially if we take Matthew’s wording of the question, we already have a hint as to what direction this conversation is going. It is NOT about DOING some GOOD things in order to EARN eternal life, as our Call to Worship from Ephesians 2 indicated. Salvation is by GRACE alone. It is what GOD has done, NOT what good thing we must do.

As for Jesus’ own self-identity here. He doesn’t want to be understood as a, quote, “Good teacher” based on the world’s standards or understanding. In fact, isn’t that the very problem we face today? Probably 75% of the people on this planet are glad to accept Jesus as a “Good Teacher.” But as C.S. Lewis has famously said, “That is not an option that Jesus gives us. Either he is who he said he is, the Son of God, or we have to place him in the same category of the self-delusional person who claims to be a poached egg.”

During his PUBLIC ministry, Jesus routinely shied away from speaking overtly about his messianic and divine identity. The contemporary Jewish concept of the Messiah was NOT the Suffering Servant of which Jesus speaks in the verses IMMEDIATELY following our passage here in Mark 10. Three times as he and his DISCIPLES are approaching Jerusalem, he speaks privately to them of this messianic role. But no one, not even the disciples, were quite ready to be fully confronted by the truth of his divine identity and its implication for his suffering and death. So yes, until his salvific work on the cross was accomplished, Jesus did very much shy away from public proclamation of his divine identity. But even in Jesus’ words, “No one is good—except God alone,” there is an implicit invitation to “Come and see” if the Good that you see in me doesn’t indeed measure up to that divine standard that you see in the Eternal. The answer will become evident.

2-Good, “Good Enough” & Grace-- So already we are moving in the direction of meeting the second objection—Why doesn’t Jesus seem to give this man credit for the good guy that he is? Well, that is a dubious question. In fact, we really don’t know HOW good this guy was. We certainly know how good HE THINKS he is! He THINKS himself to be VERY good guy. This raises a red flag of sorts right there, for me. Six commandments that Jesus tosses out at him—He doesn’t bat an eye-lash. KEPT THEM ALL! Not only now but since I was a boy! Now not to be
cynical, but based on such a GOOD life, I would love to sell him some GOOD swamp land down in Florida!

But even granting him the benefit of the doubt of being a pretty good guy, one wonders whether he had yet heard the news on the street of Jesus’ teaching from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus takes many of these same commandments and takes them one giant step further by getting to the root of the problem, the interior life. MURDER? It begins in the heart, Jesus says. It begins with the anger in your heart against your brother. When you dis someone by calling them a FOOL your guilt is just as great as sticking the dagger in. ADULTERY? Again, it begins in the heart, lusting after a woman or by visiting that pornographic website.

Jesus doesn’t press him on the front end of the Decalogue, the ones pertaining to LOVE for God, but with lazar-like perception Jesus sees through the veneer to discern that his wealth was really an idol that he had set up ahead of God. With his great wealth, one wonders to what degree he was actually following even the basic Old Testament standard of stewardship of giving the tithe, the first 10% of his income to the Lord.

We had a very popular little booklet floating around here at Faith a couple of years ago called “How Good Is Good Enough.” The bottom line biblical premise is that NONE of us are good enough to measure up to God’s standards, and that it is not, and never will be, a question of DOING just the right thing, or DOING just enough, of KEEPING just enough of the Commandments enough of the time. It all comes back to God’s GRACE which we considered so fully last week.

3—“God is a Gentleman” -- In regards to the third concern of Jesus just letting this person just walk away from the Kingdom, it is clear that God deeply desires that all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, as it says in 1 Timothy 2:4. Likewise, Jesus also tells the compelling story of the shepherd who in his deep love for EVERY member of the flock, leaves the 99 sheep in the fold in order to go out into the wilderness to search for that one lost lamb. That’s why we support Bible Translators who sometimes labor for 20 years or more to put God’s word into the language of remote people groups who may only have a relatively small number of speakers. This is the one lost sheep compared to the 99% of people who may already have Scriptures in their other tongue.

But as has been said, God is also a gentleman and does not force himself upon anyone. Whether it is the woman who was trafficked last week or the little children who stand in stark contrast to this Rich Young Ruler, who Jesus embraces in the verses immediately before our text for today, the Lord’s love and welcome is lavish for all. But each one of us needs to decide what we are going to do with that invitation. Jesus never forces us to follow him.

4—And finally, to this whole topic about money and wealth. You can relax, because I am not really going to talk about money—perhaps only very indirectly. Because this passage is Not so much about wealth / money as it is about what keeps us from Following Jesus. What keeps us from following Jesus can be as different as the number of people that are here right now. The ball and chain that keeps a person enslaved may have absolutely nothing to do with money. It may be a past memory that you stubbornly refuse to let go of. I have heard stories of the most minor of incidents where someone in the church has offended a person such that they have totally turned their backs on God. No excuses for those of us who may have said dumb things, or been insensitive or let time-honored tradition take precedent over a real, live person. But how tragic if we forever pout or hold on to bitterness and miss out on the blessedness of Following Jesus.
It may be any number of life style issues—not just of the “rich and famous” but also of the rank and file middleclass— that doesn’t allow time and space for God. It may be a co-dependent relationship that you even know is unhealthy, one that sucks the life out of you. Granted, deeply engrained patterns of life or hard to break, even if there is something far better out there. Or is there a possession that, in fact, possesses you? Something you hold so dearly that you could never part with? It may be something that just sits there, that you hardly DO anything with it, but it is for you a symbol of who you are—really a sort of idol. Or it may be a luxury or even a convenience that you feel you could never live without. That relationship, that habit, that website, that TV show, that insecurity that you have let define who you are.

In this week’s Covenant Home Altar—a daily devotional available on the lobby table adjacent to the library, Covenant Pastor, Andy Sebanc, refers to the dramatic story of Aron Ralston, featured in the movie 127 Hours. The true life story takes place in the remote wilderness of SE Utah. Experienced climber and canyon explorer that he was, Ralston was alone and far from civilization when a boulder dislodged and trapped his arm. The book version that he co-authored is appropriately entitled, Between a Rock and a Hard Place. As you might guess, the 127 Hours in the movie title refers to how long Ralston was trapped—five and a half days—before he finally amputated his own arm above the wrist setting himself free. In response to the ordeal, he says he didn’t lose his hand, but rather that he regained his life. He did not lose his hand. Rather he regained his life! What an image for us today!

The boulder that had the Rich Young Ruler trapped was his wealth. Jesus could see that in HIS case, that is what clearly kept him from following him. The specific command to, “go and sell everything” he had and give to the poor was, in a sense, meeting the man on his own terms based on his own human goodness and merit. It was not a command given to all would-be followers of Jesus. BUT it is interesting that in virtually every case, those who DO follow Jesus voluntarily, almost instinctively leave something behind. James & John leave their fishing nets—their means of livelihood. Matthew left his tax-collectors booth. Mary Magdalene willingly left the seven demons that possessed her, messing up her life. What is it for you that may be keeping you from being a Fully Committed Follower. … of Jesus? Are you willing to let the Great Physician cut it out of your life?

In summary, there are three short, key phrases that give me great hope and encouragement in this passage. The first one comes at the beginning of verse 21. “Jesus looked at him and LOVED HIM.”

1. Jesus Loved Him. (v.21) -- Whatever else we might say about Jesus’ seemingly harsh directive to the Rich Young Ruler to go and sell everything he had, it came out of a heart bursting with love. I grew up in an era when as a younger boy, a well calculated spank on the seat of the pants was still occasionally delivered as discipline to reinforce a corrective lesson being taught. [Now I will let you draw your own conclusions as to how messed up that left Pastor Dennis…] But I can still hear my Dad saying something at the time which sounded so strange to my ears, but now makes so much sense. He said, “This is hurting me more than it is you.” As I kid, I had that one figured out. ‘THEN JUST DON’T DO IT!!’ I am sure my Dad anguished over needing to spank me, his own flesh and blood. Now to be very clear, he never did it in rage or in the heat of the moment, but always with careful reflection. In private, not to shame or embarass. It was never injurious. I never once doubted my Dad’s deep love for me. He would have much rather I learned certain lessons of obedience and proper behavior the first time around, willingly, without consequences.

Now the question at hand is not at all corporal punishment. But like my father’s deep love that wanted his son to grow up knowing right from wrong, wanting only the very best for my
life, so for Jesus, it was out of deep love with the young man’s very best interest that the choice—the two roads—was put before him. God in his love wants desperately that we come to discern between the good and the very best, the road that seems so liberating but really leads to bondage from that which brings true freedom and joy in Christ. God’s motive is absolutely, always LOVE. That is what was behind the clear crossroads Jesus presented to the Rich Young Ruler. If we today need to make some hard choices, it is only because Jesus loves us and wants the best for us and learn to make the right decisions.

2-The second encouraging short phrase at the end of that same verse 21 is “Follow Me.” It is what this series is all about. They are common words that Jesus routinely addresses to many of his would-be disciples. Yes, to follow Jesus, we often need to first let go of the entrapments of lesser things or even go to the point of extricating ourselves from giant boulders that have us pinned down. But reading these words in the context of this passage, it struck me in a new way. The corollary of that phrase is, “I will lead you!” When Jesus says, “Follow me,” he is also promising, “I will lead you.”

Though I have done a lot of wilderness hiking, as well as backpacking, I have only done one technical mountain climb. For the former, there have always been at least trail markers to guide the way—and, indeed, an actual trail that was maintained to one degree or another. The one technical climb I did was up 11,000+ ft. Mt. Hood in the state of Oregon, during my year of seminary internship a number of years ago now. But I would never have dreamt of doing that unless I had Dave leading me and four others as we made our way up the trail-less, rocky slope and then the glacier snow covered mountain. Dave had been to the top several times before. He knew the way. He knew the danger spots. He knew when we needed to rope up to ensure safety should any of us slip. He knew what time we needed to start hiking which proved to be about 1am by moon-light and flash-light, in order to get to the top by 7am and off the mountain within an hour or two after that, lest the warming sun cause snow slides and even avalanches later in the morning and in the afternoon.

I was able to fully enjoy the splendor of creation, the majestic vistas and the exhilaration of physical challenge, as well as the comraderie of doing together what would be unsafe alone, all because we had a trusted leader. Who or what are you following in life today? If we are followers of Christ, it means we have a loving leader going before us. So if Jesus is the one who bids me step out of the boat onto the stormy sea, if he invites me to pick up the basin and towel of service, if it is he who even says, “Take up your cross daily,” then I want to be “ALL IN” to follow him!

3) And the final word of encouragement comes at the end of v.28, with Jesus’ words, “all things are possible with God.” If the call to follow Jesus seems at times a bit daunting, take heart. All things are possible with God. In fact, it is God through the Spirit of Christ which is at work within us who empowers us. It is not about us, but rather about Christ who lives his life through each of us his followers. There is NO GOOD THING we can do to inherit eternal life. It is not about what I can do, or need to do. It is about what God has already DONE, a God with whom all things are possible.

IF there is anything we need to do, it is simply to surrender to Him. Give to Him any affections or allegiance, passions or possessions that you think you can’t live without—Those things that keep you from being a fully committed follower of Jesus. At times it may not be easy, but with God all things are possible. Even if I am Not A Fan of this passage, by God’s grace and power, I am a Follower, and I trust and pray you are, too! Let’s pray.