

Good Grief
Mark 10: 17-31
Don Lincoln

In the fall of 2003, as Westminster rearranged its worship schedule for about the 4th time since I became pastor three years earlier, someone noticed a growing problem. In fact I think LOTS of people noticed the problem – and occasionally I heard about it. But I never experienced it personally.

The problem was our new worship schedule in this growing congregation, which moved from two services to three services with only 25 minutes between them – and the fact that we had a single driveway, complicated by the number of vehicles exiting – especially those wanting to go west on Pleasant Grove – and the number of vehicles entering made our traffic flow at the front entrance chaos.

I never experienced it, because I arrive around 6:00am on Sunday morning and usually don't leave until 1:00pm. You should try it sometime – you can park anywhere you want!

Anyway, one member in particular – Ralph Verno – not only noticed the hassle – but also the danger. Surely the danger of cars backing up onto 202, and the sort of 4-way-stop-sign-kind-of-jockeying-for-who-goes-next at our front entrance – but probably even more, the **spiritual** danger of good Christian people slipping into not-so-good-Christian behavior as they try to get to worship on time! I am confident that observing this grieved Ralph's heart and spirit.

Well – it just so happened that Ralph was uniquely equipped to respond. A member of the region's Fire Police – trained for traffic and crowd control – and grieved by what he saw at our entrance – Ralph donned his high visibility vest, and for most Sundays **for the next 15 years** – left the first service a little early and stationed himself at our driveway entrance, directing members and visitors for efficient traffic flow and helped many avoid unchristian thoughts, language and gestures!

In our text, a man, who we later find out is wealthy, comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. And Jesus suggests to him, "You know the commandments – you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness....."

Isn't it interesting mostly the Thou-Shalt-Not-commandments. I'm guessing Jesus already knows what this man's problem is. For here, it turns out, is a litany of all the things this man has refrained from doing. He tells Jesus, "Yep – got those covered – obeyed them since I was a kid."

But notice what commands are missing. The Lord your God is one God. Thou shalt have no other Gods before me. In other words, who or what is first in your life? Who or what **IS** your God? The commandments are not just about avoiding being bad, but about being truly God centered, and thus, who God intends us to be.

Jesus tells the man he's missed the mark, and the man is shocked – he thought he'd been a good boy. Jesus tells him, "You haven't. You've given your soul to your things and not to God. Sell what you have, and give it to the poor." The text tells us the man went away **grieving**, for he had many possessions.

Now, before I dismiss the man out of hand, let me be honest. I am going to give the man the benefit of the doubt, and assume he's not simply trying to procure eternal life just like he's amassed a personal fortune, like "I'll take one of these, and two of those."

I suspect there is in this man's life some restless discontent.¹ He is a person of wealth and power, but he knows something is missing. His heart is not settled, and he is not afraid of acknowledging his own pain – his own emptiness. He comes, running, expectantly, and kneels down before Jesus, and calls Jesus "good teacher," and asks about eternal life. That is not the posture of someone who is fat and happy.

Notice what the text says about Jesus. Before Jesus makes his suggestion to the man of what he must do, it says: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." He loved him. And then said, "Sell all you have."

Anybody in here anxious to be loved by THAT kind of love? We would agree, this is tough love. But the fact of the matter is, this is true love, healing love – because this is an intervention.

Jesus loves the rich man. He does not view him as intentionally evil. Rather than condemning him, Jesus confronts the man with his weakness, his captivity to his possessions that prevents him from living into the full life of the kingdom. Jesus names the "power" that holds the man captive and invites him to step into freedom.

This is like what we have to say to those we love who have lost themselves to something less than fruitful or even worse, something that is destructive – an abusive relationship, addiction to opioids, sold out to gambling.

This is surgical love – a spiritual bypass – open heart surgery on the soul that sees what must be done in this man's life, in order to restore him to health. It's the same thing Jesus would do with each of us. Loves us enough to tell us the truth about what needs to change in our lives.

We know by the conversation about the commandments that the man has been respectable. But friends, you and I know we can live a lifetime of respectability and still have a heart cold as stone.² How many of us think life is measured by what we have

refrained from doing, what laws we didn't break? A life lived like that might have THIS epitaph on their tombstone: "He always went the speed limit." Some legacy.

Jesus is telling the man who went away grieving, "You're grieving about the wrong stuff. Let your heart be grieved by the need you see around you – and do something about it."

Jesus invites this man, and us, to consider not what we haven't done, what wrongs we've avoided, what laws we haven't broken, but to ask ourselves, "What HAVE we done?" Is there anything in the world around that grieves our hearts, to which you and I might give ourselves? Are there any lost, or poor, or heartbroken, or needy, for whom we might expend ourselves?

You see, life in the Kingdom is about transformation and character change. Not just not being bad – but noticing what there is to notice that might grieve your heart and my heart, even as it grieves God's heart. Life in the Kingdom is about caring and sharing. Even if – and sometimes especially when – it costs us.

Watch this video – another clip from this year's Global Leadership Summit:

I was 3-1/2 years old when my family left Vietnam. After the war, we lost everything. The only way for the South Vietnamese people to leave the country was to pack themselves on these little fishing boats and sell out to sea. The estimate was that one out of two people who fled Vietnam as refugees – as boat people – died at sea.

We were attacked by pirates. Fortunately we survived that attack but our boat had no engine, no fuel, no water, no food. We just drifted out there. We all suffered; some people died. The women on board the boat started talking about maybe drowning their children to end their suffering.

This was a time when Seasweep found us.

"How long have they been drifting?"

"Ten days."

They've been drifting 10 days!?"

"Yes, sir."

They were out to provide assistance to refugees but they weren't authorized to pick us up on their boat. But after seeing our desperate state, Sam Mooneyham and the captain of the ship decided they could not just look the other way.

"I know what decision you are going to make; you'd make the same one I would make."

"Ok."

"But I'm going to let you make it because you'll have to make all the others."

"Alright..... Take them aboard!" Cheering and clapping.

When I think about where I am today, I've been happily married to my high school sweetheart, Liselle – we've been married almost 20 years now – we have four children, I went to Harvard College and Harvard Medical School. I am a dermatologist who specializes in skin cancer surgery. It really is just mind blowing because statistically I shouldn't be alive. I could pinpoint it down to that first action of just unconditional love.

Operation Seasweep. A freighter from the Christian organization World Vision, meeting need. A captain, willing to risk great cost in order to make a difference, to respond to higher law. Vinh Chung, whose ethnically Chinese family was being persecuted by the communist government because they were an ethnic minority in Vietnam, escaped, was adopted along with his family by a church in Arkansas. The family came to faith and now Vinh – a Harvard med school grad is using the success of his medical practice to bring health to people in Cambodia and Africa. And all because someone was grieved by what they saw on a boat one day.

To follow Jesus, you have to see that life is made for more than itself, you have to risk something big for something good. You have to risk giving Him your heart – ALL of it – and then follow where He leads you.

The rich man knew he didn't have what he needed. He runs to Jesus. Jesus loving him as He looked upon him. But, what the man wanted, he did not want enough to pay the price; so while he ran up full of expectancy, it was only minutes before he walked away grieving.

You and I can be sure when the man turned away, God felt a rush of grief. For nothing so pains God as to see people choose not to be what they have it in them to be.

Most of you probably don't know this, but Ralph Verno, our driveway traffic guy, went to seminary a long time ago. At one point he thought perhaps God was calling him to ordained ministry. Ultimately, Ralph ended up with a PhD in mathematics, and was a professor at West Chester University.

But it's clear, Ralph has had a ministry. In too many times, places and ways to describe in this sermon. But one of them happened to be when Ralph was grieved by something he saw – discomfort and danger for his neighbors, and expended himself – sacrificed finishing out worship – hanging out with his friends – being the first one to get to the sticky buns – greeting the pastor at the door and making suggestions for next week's sermon – and gave a portion of his morning – every Sunday morning – for the sake of us all.

Ralph retired last spring – I won't tell you his age, but it seemed a prudent thing to do. No one has stepped up with Ralph's unique talent for traffic control. That's why in next year's budget we're putting in a line item to pay an off-duty police officer – in order to control our traffic – and also to address the sad, but current reality of needing to present an increased level of security in this public place with so many people gathered each week.

But that's just one of the ways next year's budget will address a need. You know full well it also addresses hunger, homelessness, addictions of all kinds, family stresses,

the need for children to learn every week they are loved by a great and amazing God so that one day they will grow up and be delighted to be part of a congregation whose budget reflects a thousand ways that we know we are called to love our neighbor.

What a joy it is to be a pastor in a congregation that gets it. That gets when you and I are grieved by the brokenness in this world, when you and I find ourselves in that place of good grief that we are stirred to the joyful life of extravagant generosity – sharing of who we are and what we have – blessed to be a blessing. May it be so. AMEN.

1. William Sloane Coffin, “Two Cheers For The Rich Young Ruler;” sermon on March 3, 1985.

2. *ibid.*