

**Message: Committed to God**

**What’s holding you back?**

Many of you may be familiar with the books of Philip Yancy, a well-know pastor and author. Yancy recently told a story about his interview with an amazing, teenaged woman who was a candidate for the Olympics. Her life had changed dramatically after an accident paralyzed her from the neck down. She said, “Philip, you don’t realize how incredibly humiliating this is. I can’t go to the bathroom by myself. I can’t even cry by myself. Somebody has to wipe my eyes with Kleenex. I can’t get dressed. I can’t face the rest of my life like this!”<sup>1</sup>

**Clearly, this young woman was facing a life not of her choosing, filled with challenges, doubts and uncertainty.** Her life wasn’t going the way she wanted or expected. Have any of you ever felt challenged by life? Ever had doubts about faith? Ever been uncertain about the future? Of course we have! Life is filled with things that have the power to take our focus from Jesus and put it on ourselves.

**Today, many people have been blessed by the life and ministry of that inspiring woman, Joni Erickson Tada.** She travels the world, sharing her life and faith with millions of people. Years later, Philip and Joni had another chance to speak. She said to him, “Philip, I would have to say what happened when I dived into Chesapeake Bay and broke my neck was the greatest thing that ever happened to me. God used that experience to accomplish so much. The day I wanted erased from my life was the day that paved the way to so much good.”<sup>2</sup>

**What an amazing story of faith and commitment. It’s an example of the way God’s love and power can overcome all odds!** Joni’s life is proof that a committed faith isn’t about living without doubt and uncertainty. Faithful commitment to God means putting aside whatever distracts us, embracing Jesus and following him in spite of our doubts. That’s the central message of our well-known Scripture passage for today, Mark 10:17-31.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/faithvalues/when-its-hard-to-believe.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/hottopics/faithvalues/when-its-hard-to-believe.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

**What keeps us from living a life 100% committed to Christ?** We all have something. It may be material – money or possessions. It could be mental or emotional – our pride or ambition. It might be a matter of the heart – our family and friends. It might even be spiritual – maybe we’ve been hurt, perhaps by someone in the church. These are all things that can shift our focus from God to our own wants and desires. The saddest part is that we may not be aware of what’s holding us back.

That’s what we see in the rich man’s question to Jesus in v17 when he asks, “*Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (NRSV).<sup>3</sup> The man doesn’t just call Jesus rabbi, an honorary term, he calls him good rabbi. The use of the word “good” has a specific implication. It’s typically only used in reference to God, or YHWH.

By asking what he “*might do to inherit eternal life*” (v17), the rich man is showing he still has an earthly view of heaven. The Greek word translated as “inherit” can also mean acquire. Today, we think of acquiring inheritance in terms of wills and last testaments, where a beloved relative passes on their prized possessions as they choose. In the Hebrew culture, inheritance can be apportioned by casting lots.

For example, Joshua apportioned the promised lands to the tribes of Israel by casting lots. So, in effect, the man is asking how he can acquire what was promised in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 11: long life and prosperity for him, his family and children. The man wants to make sure he has a stake in God’s divine lottery. He wants his share of the rewards. What he wants to know is how to get it.

**Jesus sets things straight.** God is the only source of goodness (v18). There is no other source. As United Methodists, we believe God’s prevenient grace goes into the world and is the source for good things. God is the one who gives eternal life. Humans cannot do so, no matter how much we wish we could.

**Jesus doesn’t stop there, though.** He addresses the man’s desire to acquire God’s reward. Jesus refers the man to the commandments God gave to Moses (v19); specifically, to commandments about how we are to love and care for others. The man is smart. He understands what

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<sup>3</sup> All Bible references are New Revised Standard Version via [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

Jesus is asking. He lived according to God’s law since he was young, so he tells Jesus (v20). I love the first part of v21, “*Jesus, looking at him, loved him....*” That means Jesus took a good, long look at the man, saw no deceit, and took pleasure in his honest desire for eternal life.

**However, there’s one thing that needs to be addressed first.** You see, there’s always been a cost to being Jesus’ disciple. Jesus is on a urgent mission and those who follow him need to share that same sense of urgency. Mark tells us in v17 Jesus is starting a journey. It’s a trip that will eventually end in Jerusalem and his death on a cross. Jesus wants followers who aren’t distracted by worldly concerns; their focus is on spiritual things, specifically on their relationship with God.

**The man asked an honest question, so Jesus gives him an answer.** Jesus tests the man’s faith and commitment saying, “*You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me*” (v21). Jesus is asking the man to become one of his disciples, a great honor and privilege. But he has to choose. If the man makes the sacrifice, he will be changed inside. He must empty himself of worldly things to be filled with spiritual gifts. When he does, he will show he has the capacity to store up the things Jesus will reveal to him, so he can share them with others – that’s what it means to have “*treasure in heaven*” (v21). When we empty our selves, we are ready to be filled with God’s grace.

**Rather than saying “yes, Lord,” the man leaves with great sadness.** He knew Jesus was asking for a commitment, but he was shocked at how much he would have to sacrifice – everything he held dear. The man’s focus was on things and Jesus was asking him to give up the material to focus on the spiritual, on Jesus and his life-changing mission. This isn’t the first time Jesus did so. Jesus asked each of the disciples the same question. They answered “yes” and walked away from boats full of fish, families, collection boxes full of tax money, and more.

**Maybe you’ve heard, read and studied this lesson many times.** If so, you know we want exactly the same thing the man wanted: eternal life. We also follow the commandments. We hear Jesus’ answer and wag our heads at the man’s response, thinking that’s too bad for him. We’re so glad we made the choice to say ‘yes.’ If you’re thinking that, you need

to hear what Jesus says to his disciples in v23. Let me paraphrase it, “*It’s very difficult for anyone with possessions to enter the kingdom of God!*” Confused? I mean, come on, we have possessions but we’re not stinking rich. We’re honest and appealing. We made the effort to get up and come to church this morning. And we really intend to follow Jesus, unlike that guy. If you’re thinking something along those lines, you’re in good company, because Jesus’ disciples were, too. It just doesn’t make sense. Why is Jesus talking about possessions?

**Hear Jesus speaking to us in vv24-25**, “*Children, how very difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone with possessions to enter the kingdom of God.*” Wow, what a contrast! We can’t even begin to imagine how it could be. It isn’t physically possible! If it’s easier for the impossible to happen than for anyone to go to heaven, what are we doing here? We might as well give up, turn the lights off, lock the church and go home.

**Jesus saw the impact his words had on the disciples.** Jesus sees what these words do to us when they sink into our minds as well. Doubt begins to cloud our thoughts and our heart is uncertain. Our brains seem to get stuck, like a car stalling out at the critical time, when we really need to accelerate to avoid the accident waiting to happen right in front of us. We’re not sure what to do.

**Jesus gives us hope in v27**, “*For mortals [salvation] is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.*” If Jesus loved the rich man who turned away, we know he loves those who do not turn away, who continue to struggle, trust God, and seek the kingdom of God. Jesus is on a journey to prove his love, faith and desire to save us. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice as a sign of his commitment, revealing his identity as our true savior and redeemer.

Jesus wants followers who are willing to do what it takes: the test of our faith and commitment remains. We cannot save ourselves, only God can do that. Jesus still asks us to sacrifice all that we have before we can follow him on the path that leads to eternal life. In v25, the Greek phrase translated as “*one who has possessions*” can also mean “*one who trusts in the things they use to meet their needs.*” The meaning is clear:

possessions aren't the only things that come between us and a commitment to God.

**Whatever you place before God serves as a barrier you cannot cross.** It takes your focus off of Jesus and shifts it to your own self-interests. It doesn't matter what it is. For most of us, possessions are a challenge. We live in the wealthiest nation that has ever existed. We own more than 80% of the world's capital wealth. We use more than 65% of all the world's resources. And yet our population is only 5% of the world's population. We need to ask for forgiveness, create equal opportunity and share sacrificially.

For others of us, our minds are the challenge. Pride comes in many shapes and forms, tapping our emotions, intellect and ambition. Pride can express itself in the need to be in authority or to reject authority. Pride can express itself in the form of intellectual stimulation, particularly when we're captured by the relativism of the modern age. Pride is at the root of fame, the desire to be admired and in control.

Many of us are challenged by relationships or our physical being. We put relationships ahead of Jesus more often than we want to admit. If Jesus isn't first in your life, how do you know how to love another person in a committed relationship? This is true for husbands and wives, parents and children, and extended family arrangements. Some of us might deal with physical challenges, like Joni Erickson Tada or Nick Vujicic, the author of *Life Without Limits*. Nick was born without limbs – he was born with no arms or legs, yet he lives a full life and he travels around the world giving inspirational talks about how God works in and through his life. Nick says, “The challenges in our lives are there to strengthen our convictions. They are not there to run us over.”<sup>4</sup>

**Have you ever tried to read something or look at an image through a magnifying glass?** When you are looking directly through the center of the glass, things are clear. That's what happens when we focus on Jesus. But when our eyes drift to the edge of the magnifying glass, things get blurry and out of focus. The same is true when we let our attention and commitment shift from Jesus to other things. Life gets blurry. We lose

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3395320.Nick\\_Vujicic](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3395320.Nick_Vujicic)

clarity and wonder what the purpose of our life is. We begin to question what we believe. We find ourselves in more arguments with less peace and rest. Maybe we're kept up at night when our spirit is unsettled.

**The only hope we have when that happens is to turn around.** We have to change. We have to understand that Jesus wants everything! We can't hold anything back. We have to trust God. We must freely choose. Even when we're filled with doubt and uncertainty about our choices, we are to trust God and commit ourselves by faith.

**The rewards for committing our lives to God 100% of the time are spelled out in v30.** The greatest reward is eternal life. The promise of eternal life is what makes the world's thirst for spirituality such a deep-seated, ongoing desire. You may be surprised to learn there is a reward in our lifetime as well. For each sacrifice we make for Jesus and his mission, we will be rewarded a hundred times over. If you sacrifice your house serving Jesus, one hundred homes will be open to you. If you sacrifice your mother, siblings or children for Jesus, a hundred mothers will embrace you warmly, you will have hundreds of brothers and sisters in Christ, and you will know children of God in all varieties. People may challenge you for your faith and question your sacrifice, but others will open their hearts, minds and doors to you as a child of God. That's what gives Joni Erickson Tada and Nick Vujicic the strength to face the challenges of life with an inspiring joy and passion to serve.

**Jesus ends the lesson with a warning in v31,** one of the great tenets of Christian faith, *“many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”* Sadly, there are people in our lives, our neighborhoods and some gathered here today who are like the rich man. They live the right way, say the right things and honestly desire eternal life. But they aren't fully committed to God. When put to the test, they will turn away from Jesus. They will turn away from the church with the false belief that spirituality is more important than authentic relationships in a community of faith. They will turn away and focus on their own interests, rather than making a sacrifice out of love for God and love for others.

**Anyone can be saved and receive eternal life.** God calls all of us. All we have to do is choose. Choose life and commit yourself 100%. Make Jesus your first and greatest love. If you're ready to freely commit 100% of your life to Jesus, say "Come, Lord Jesus."

Pray with me...

Almighty God,

*Thank you for your great mercy in sending us your Son, our Savior and Redeemer. Thank you for giving us the capacity to choose. Forgive us for holding back. Forgive us when we want our own way. Save us and guide us! Give us strength to follow you, even when we have doubts and when the way forward is unclear. Give us the courage to commit everything we have and are to Christ and to your church, holding nothing back. Build up our community of faith here in our city, bless our leaders, and give us the capacity to trust and love one another as your children. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.*

**Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV)**

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age - houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions - and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”