

“What Was He Missing?”
Mark 10:17-27
23rd Sunday after Pentecost

November 13, 2022
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Out at dinner with my family this past Friday evening, my wife asked me a question that I had never thought of before.

She said, “Ben, what birthday was your favorite birthday?”

I didn’t have an answer for her, although it did encourage me to take a trip down memory lane.

And one of the birthdays that came to mind was my first SLEEPOVER birthday, when I turned 9 years old, and something like 10 or 12 friends spent the night at our house.

I remember wanting to play football with them the next morning. So we went to the field at our elementary school to play football. But we weren’t allowed to play tackle football.

My mom took all these old socks, and they became our “flags,” stuffed the socks around our belts, and we played “flag” football with those socks...but no tackle.

Why no tackle?

Because, a year or so earlier, I had suffered a concussion playing tackle football—no pads, no helmet, just pick up tackle football with my friends.

I hit my head on the frozen Michigan ground and was out of school for a few days.

So my parents said, “No more pick up tackle football.”

This is a situation, they said, where we cannot be too careful.

At the time, I didn’t like their decision, but when I became a parent, I understood their decision.

There are just some situations—where you just can't be too careful.

Your teenager is going through Driver's Ed.

Did they teach you about defensive driving?

Yes, dad.

Did they tell you how dangerous it is to try to answer a text when you drive—don't ever send a text when you're behind the wheel!

There are times, in interactions between parent and child, there are times when you just can't be too careful.

Hold that thought.

And let's look at our text.

In our text for today, a man approaches Jesus.

He wants to follow Jesus.

And to boost his resume, he tells Jesus that he has followed all the commandments since his youth.

In other words, this guy is careful.

This guy is no slouch.

He's a good man, a diligent man.

Someone who's committed, and he's got a conscience, and he gets things done.

And Jesus tells this man, "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."

My question is this: why wasn't Jesus just a little more careful?

Sell everything you own?
Give it all away?

That's not a realistic goal.
That's a RADICAL goal.
It's not just something that would improve the rich man's life.
It's going to OVERTURN his life.

And he knows it.

*When he heard this, Mark writes,
he was shocked and went away grieving,
for he had many possessions.*

Why wasn't Jesus just a little bit more careful?
Why didn't Jesus bring the man along gently, slowly,
and nurture him into becoming the disciple
he surely had the potential to be?

You see, when push comes to shove, that's how I want Jesus to behave in my life. Bringing me along, slowly, gently—nurturing me into becoming the disciple that Jesus really wants me to be.

Not with radical goals, but with realistic goals.

Which is why this text has always bothered me.

It's not that I think Jesus is telling me, or telling you, in our hearing of these words today, that all of us are supposed to give all of our possessions away.

That's not what bothers me about this text.
What bothers me about this text is the deal with being careful.
Because it raises a question that I don't really want to answer:

Are there times in life when you and I can be too careful?

Never mind Jesus for a moment.

We all know that life presents us with moments, sometimes unexpected, when being careful, exercising caution, is NOT what's needed the most.

Our family was on vacation this past summer, at the beach.

A woman was with her young child in the water.

She was getting farther out, the waves were getting stronger—when everyone at the beach suddenly heard shouting.

It was the woman shouting.

It wasn't clear why she was shouting.

Was it a cry of laughter, fun in the water with her child?

After a few seconds, it became clear that the answer was no—it was a cry for help.

This Mom had NOT been careful, and had gotten too far out, and her young toddler was with her, but Mom's feet were no longer touching the bottom, and she was being taken out to sea, with her toddler...

Fortunately, there was a man very close to where I was on the shore, someone who looked to be in his 20s, very fit—he wasn't a lifeguard, but he heard her and he took off running and then swimming after her.

Her husband—he was on the shore—he went out as well, and they were able to get to the toddler, who had become separated from the mother and was wearing floaties—but the mother had drifted farther away.

Dad took the toddler and headed back toward the beach.

The young man swam toward the woman, who by this time was in a panic. Long story short, that guy reached the woman and helped bring her back to shore.

What I remember most was a moment after he had reached that Mom...out in the ocean, before others got out there...a moment when BOTH of them were unable to put their feet on the ground.

And that guy was yelling for additional help, trying to hold the Mom up...thankfully, help arrived.

But it was a risk, right?
He took a chance.

It was a moment when a stranger threw care and caution to the wind...and it literally saved a young mother's life.

Have you ever had a moment like that?
I don't mean rescuing someone at the beach.

I mean a moment where you just had to act, to make a decision, and being careful was NOT the first thing on your mind?

Think about it in terms of your life of faith.

In your life of faith, in your walk with Jesus, when was the last time you ran out into the DEEP WATERS?

In your life of faith, when was the last time your feet couldn't touch the bottom? And even though you were HOPING you could do what needed to be done, anything could have happened...

When was the last time you said:
Jesus, I'm going to trust you, even if it means I have to STOP being careful?

In his marvelous book, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, Tim Tyson tells a story about his father, the Rev. Vernon Tyson.

In the fall of 1963, Vernon Tyson was serving a small, all-white Methodist church when he met a Black minister, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Proctor.

At the time, Dr. Proctor was one of the leading preachers of his generation.

He was, at that time, the President of North Carolina A&T.

After hearing Dr. Proctor speak, Vernon Tyson invited Dr. Proctor to come to the little Methodist church that Vernon Tyson served, to preach in that church's pulpit on race relations Sunday.

Remember, this is at the height of the Civil Rights movement.

And everything that was happening with the Civil Rights movement was NOT universally popular in Vernon Tyson's little Methodist church.

Once news got out that Dr. Proctor was going to preach, the phone began to ring at Vernon Tyson's home.

Fifty members of his congregation called a protest meeting.
Death threats started coming in from the community.
PRESSURE mounted on him to call the whole thing off.

The night before Dr. Proctor was set to preach, an emergency meeting was called by the board of the church.

One man kept telling Vernon Tyson:
"You can end all this with a phone call."

Another man insisted:
"You're going to tear this church apart."

Then a quiet, dignified woman rose to speak.

Her name was "Miss Amy" Womble, a 60-year-old schoolteacher who taught first grade, and most of the men in that room had, in their elementary school years, been in her first grade classroom.

"There was a case up near Chapel Hill recently," she said, "where a teenage boy drove around a curve too fast, and was killed. So they thought."

"There wasn't any signs of life. But then an airman from Pope Air Force Base stopped. He was home on furlough, and he saw the teenager lying down there and he scrambled down the embankment and opened that kid's mouth."

"And he saw that his tongue was stuck in the back of his throat, so he ran his finger back there and pulled out his tongue, and then gave him

mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. By the time the ambulance got there, that kid was walking around alive as you or me.”

“What I haven’t told you,” she went on to say to her church, “is that the boy who had the wreck was white, and that airman that saved him was a Black man...and I want all you fathers to tell me something.”

Her eyes scanned the room.

“Which one of you fathers would have said to that airman, ‘Don’t you run your fingers down my boy’s throat? Which of y’all would have told that airman, ‘Don’t you dare put your lips on my boy’s mouth to save his life’?”

When Miss Amy got done speaking, the board of the church voted to keep the invitation, and Dr. Proctor preached a beautiful sermon the next morning.¹

Now...

I know that took place almost 60 years ago.

And the presenting issues for churches today may look a little different than back in Vernon Tyson’s day.

But the underlying evils are still the same.

Whether we’re talking about the racism or antisemitism or materialism of our day, whether it’s homophobia or xenophobia or some other fear of any of God’s children...the question is the same:

Are there ways in which followers of Jesus can be too careful?

¹ Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004.

According to Jesus, the answer is yes.

That answer, that realization—that there are times when we CAN be too careful with our gifts—I think, is what that rich man was missing.

He wasn't a bad man.

I don't think he was a stingy man. If he was following Jewish law carefully, he would have been used to giving his money away.

I believe...he was a CAREFUL man.

And he could not break the habit of being too careful.

Now...I'm not beating the rich man up for all that.

I feel very close to the rich man in all that.

Because I know that there are plenty of places in my own life of faith where I behave just...like...that.

When it comes to loving my enemies?

I am much too careful.

When it comes to forgiving someone I don't want to forgive?

I am much too careful.

When it comes to taking a chance with my faith, taking a risk for the gospel of Jesus Christ, my tendency is to want to make plans, weigh all decisions, and then decide on the most logical, rational course that will show God's love.

None of which is bad.

But what Jesus asks the rich man to do is NOT follow the most logical course of action.

Jesus asks him to take a RADICAL course of action.

To be generous in an extravagant way.
To be loving in an over-the-top kind of way.

All of which brings us back to today.
Today is Commitment Sunday.

Do you know why I love Commitment Sunday?
Do you know why I love watching all of you put pledges in these baskets up front?

Because the cards you place in these baskets...are a RADICAL act. In the age of the BIG ME, they are a way of saying life, my life, is NOT about me!

They don't just represent the amount of money that it takes to meet an operating budget.

These cards represent the faith of this church.

Each card is a way of saying, "Yes, Jesus, I'll take a chance, I'll take a risk, I'll make a promise to follow you wherever you lead me."

Putting your pledge card in that basket is a way of saying, yes, Jesus, I commit to loving friend and neighbor and stranger and even my enemies.

It's a way of saying, yes, Jesus, I commit to showing up for this faith community—by coming to worship, by going to Sunday School, by being present, not because I'll feel guilty if I don't, but because I never know when YOU, Jesus, might be waiting in these walls to OVERTURN my life in some life-changing way with your grace.

The pledge card you brought with you today is a way of saying yes, Jesus, I'm grateful—grateful for all that you have given me in my life, and I'm committed to growing, committed to stepping outside my comfort zones as I follow you, Jesus, wherever you lead me.

We've been talking about our vision all fall, and I hope this card represents your commitment to Christ and to our church's vision.

I hope it represents your commitment to practice radical hospitality, to abound in generosity, to work for justice, to expand your faith imagination, to share your joy in Jesus Christ.

I hope it represents your commitment to being a church of Open Minds Open Hearts.

There's just one thing that I hope this card does NOT represent.
And I'm preaching to myself here.
You can just listen to me preach to myself.

Ben (I'm preaching to myself)—Ben, I hope the number you put on your family's pledge card does NOT represent an instinct...to be too cautious, and too careful, with the gifts that God has given you.

I just heard myself preach to myself.
And so did you.
And it makes me wonder how far I should go—
not just with this card, but with every decision I make—
every commitment I make—
I wonder how far I should go to make sure—
to make absolutely sure—
that I'm not being too careful,
and that I'm being the generous, giving, gracious
person whom God created each of us to be.

Amen.