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The One Thing

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Mark 10:17-31 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."

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In the story of the rich ruler, I wonder if he follows Jesus from town to town to listen to the good news before he approaches Jesus? For he heard about eternal life. He wants and desires it. So he stops Jesus on the way out of town one day and asks him how to get it. Jesus answers with a question. “Are you obeying the 10 commandments?” The rich man responds, “Yes, since I was a child.” But what Jesus says next is unusual. Though we know “Jesus loves me”, he does not look at everyone he meets and say, “I really love this guy” like Jesus does here.

And in loving him, Jesus’ answer to this rich man sounds strange to our ears. Instead of saying what the rich man needs to let go of, Jesus names what he is missing. There is only one thing he needs to add to his life, says Jesus, to find his heart’s desire, eternal life.

Now by the rich man’s response, it is clear that he does not anticipate the cost. I can relate to this after a long hiatus from swimming and working out on a consistent basis. I successfully put off swimming for months with the internal argument that as the pool closed two weeks in mid-September, why begin and then lose it all over that two weeks and have to start over again?

For I know swimming will cost me something. I know becoming physically fit again will come at a price. It means taking the time to organize clothes, food and schedule the evening before regardless of whether I get home at 8:30 or 9 pm after church meetings several nights a week. It means getting up at 5 am regardless of whether I need to make a 7:30 am. coffee, see someone early in the hospital, or need to be at the office soon. It means reducing bedtime reading to get enough sleep to be able to get up. For any of us, adding the “one thing we lack” will come at a price.

To hear what he lacks can be found by gaining treasure in heaven by giving away his earthly possession was not the rich man's idea of a good plan at all. Surely his financial advisor would say, "No!". Yet clearly the rich man's wealth is not the answer to his desires or he would not be following Jesus around and asking how to get what he wants most - eternal life.

What if the one thing the rich man lacked was not poverty but trust in God? For power and money can give us a real sense of security until a depression or a war or a natural disaster destroy them. What if Jesus offers the only security that cannot be taken away? For we know all we see and touch is temporary, that only life with God lasts forever. We know it is worth any price as the Kingdom of heaven parables try to explain. They tell us the Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who finds a treasure in a field and goes and sells all he has to purchase that field or that pearl of great worth. In other words, the kingdom of heaven is worth any price.

Well, it is clear that Jesus' invitation to the rich man bears no resemblance to prosperity gospel. Jesus does not instruct him or us to give more to the church to get more from God. Instead, Jesus invited us to give 100% of our allegiance to God as a continuation of two-way relationship called covenant begun with Moses. For we are worth it to God. Why else send God's only Son to show us how much God loves us and to tell us the one thing we lack that is worth any cost to gain?

I still remember what the Mayan Indian preacher Carlos said to me on the porch of a Mayan Indian home in a small, drug-infested town in northern Guatemala over a decade ago. He said, "Though we may take one step forward and two steps back, following Jesus is the only way."