

Prepare Him Room

We don't know much about the man at first, except that he seeks out Jesus looking for something. He runs up and kneels at Jesus' feet, asking for help. We then learn that he believes himself to be faithful, insisting that he has diligently kept the Law, followed the commandments since he was a child. He has a list, and he has ticked all the boxes on that list. For those of us who are list-keepers, this is a great feeling. I have been known to write down a few already accomplished tasks just to get the rush of checking them off. A fully-checked-off list is a thing of beauty, except when that nagging feeling looms, telling you that there is something missing from the list, something you know you need but for whatever reason failed to add. *What am I missing?* the man asks Jesus. *What's not on my list? What is left for me to do?*

You lack one thing, Jesus tells him. One thing. It seems simple enough. One thing. *Great*, we can imagine the man saying. *One thing, I can do one thing*. Until Jesus tells him what that one thing is:

Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.

To be fair, Jesus, that's really two or maybe three things. Whether it's one or two or three things, it's too much, at least for the man, because—Mark tells us, the man has many possessions. So, he walks away. He does not argue, he does not try to negotiate. He walks away saddened—or sick at heart, as one translation reads. It's too much.

I am certain Jesus is sad, too, grieving that this one whom he loves is walking away from the chance to embrace the kingdom and join him as a disciple. Yes, we sing and say that Jesus loves me, loves us, and yet this is one of the rare moments in scripture where we read that Jesus loves someone. In his sadness, Jesus turns to those around him and uses the man's decision as a teaching moment, explaining how hard it is for people to join the kingdom, to receive the reign that Jesus ushers in, wealthy ones included.

At some point over the last 2000 years or so, someone thought it would make things easier for everyone if there was an actual gate in Jerusalem—or a legend about such a gate—that required camels to shed their cargo to squeeze through. The catch is that IF such a gate existed, it would be camel sized. It would be an opening that an unburdened camel could actually squeeze through. In other words, as I think about that gate, I find myself quoting a cinematic classic that turns 30 this year, “So you’re telling me there’s a chance.”¹

If a camel has even a chance of squeezing through, that means there’s a chance that I can still find a way in, all on my own, on my terms, all by myself. What Jesus actually says is: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God.” And when the exasperated disciples wonder who *can* be saved, who *can* get in, Jesus tells them it’s impossible. Without God’s help, not one of us is getting in—wealthy or otherwise; it is impossible. On our own not one of us finds our way into God’s kingdom. And the disciples are astonished, scandalized even. And this is intended to be good news—not easy news—Good News.

We are saved by grace, grace we do not and cannot earn. And yet, this grace is not simply a golden ticket to the pearly gates or the warmest cozy blanket. As many others have said before me, salvation is not simply about being saved *from* something, salvation is about being saved *FOR* something, something more than our lists and our works can offer. Jesus looks at the man and loves him and asks something of him. Jesus already loves him. And because Jesus loves him, Jesus wants more for him and more from him. The man clearly longs for something more than all his wealth and all his checking off his list can give him. He would not have run up to Jesus and knelt before him in the middle of the road in full view of everyone if he felt confident that he had all that he needed. He seems to know that Jesus has the answer; he just doesn’t like the answer he hears. Who is he without his possessions? Who is he without his list? Who is he when he is not the one in charge? Who is he if he drops everything, unloads all his cargo, and follows? It’s too much. So, he walks away, at least for now. And Jesus still loves him, even as he goes.

¹ Yes, I am quoting *Dumb and Dumber*, <https://youtu.be/nFTRwD85AQ4?si=pSN-VyOuFf7dfHLQ>

Jesus tells him that he lacks one thing, and what he seems to lack is room, space, bandwidth even, openness to a new, richer, fuller life. The man seems to want Jesus to give him another task, another finite to-do to complete his exceptionally almost-complete list. Following the Law is a good thing. Following the Law shapes a good and faithful life toward God and neighbor. But following the Law is about more than checking things off a list. So, Jesus pushes the man's list aside, calling him to go a different way, to make room in his life and his heart to welcome the kingdom and to live the kingdom life fully.

At Christmas (which was just a few days ago, right?) we sing "Joy to the World," offering a prayer for this very thing: "Let earth receive her king! Let every heart, prepare him room." It sounds so easy when the poinsettias are thriving, and the lights are twinkling. It sounds so easy to make room for one tiny child, especially when that infant doesn't cry and fits neatly in a creche on a side table in my living room. It is a whole other thing to welcome the kingdom when it shows up with this man who strides in and wants to turn my world and my life upside down, suggesting that my rule-following and task-completing do not earn me a gold star, let alone a place at the front of the line in the kingdom. It's a whole other thing to let go of having all the answers on my tidy little list, to follow where Jesus calls me to go, and to wrestle with or even simply sit with questions only he can answer.

And yet that is what he seems to be asking here, of the rich man and of all of us, to stop clutching our lists and our stuff and our status and our accomplishments, to draw our eyes up and out from our own lists and our own concerns, and to open our hearts and lives to the fullness of the kingdom. Because you and I know—or at least we say we know—that our stuff, our status, our accomplishments, our opinions, our lists, or whatever else it is that we cling to with all our might are not the things that save us, nor are they the things that usher us into the kingdom in all its fullness. Jesus loves us, AND Jesus wants more for us, more from us, more room for the kingdom to move in and through us. He's not looking simply to be another item on the list. He himself is the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. He is the list.

There is a traditional practice of giving things up for Lent. Some give up chocolate. Others give up meat or alcohol or Facebook. One friend years ago gave up watching TV for Lent. This included March Madness, of

course. It seemed so silly to me at the time, especially considering how devoted he was to the Tar Heels. And yet he seemed to sense that his TV habit was something that took up space in his mind and heart, leaving less room for who Jesus was calling him to be. The kingdom life is not about convincing Jesus to love us or save us. He already loves us, which is why he shows up and calls us to let go of what we mistakenly think will save us and to answer his invitation to follow the One who actually does save us. Over the course of this Lenten season, I wonder what it would look like for us to make room for Jesus and for his kingdom in a new way, not so that we can squeeze ourselves in to his life, but so that he doesn't have to press and push so hard to squeeze into ours.

The kingdom life is not the easy life; Jesus makes that abundantly clear. It's not a life built around comfort for me and mine. It is instead the good life. This kingdom, this good life offers hope for the despairing, truth that outshines deceit, nourishment for all who hunger, second and third and hundredth chances for those staring down dead ends, freedom for the imprisoned, wholehearted welcome for those on the margins, love that is stronger than hate or apathy, and peace that surpasses anything and everything on any human list. We cannot squeeze ourselves in, and we do have a choice. We can cling to our lists. Or by the grace of God, we can make room for the one true King who invites us to follow and cling to him.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.