

Conversations With Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] It's always very useful to have your Bibles open at the passage that the minister is preaching from, so I encourage you to have your Bibles open at Mark chapter 10 and it really must have been quite a scene. This man running up to Jesus, falling down on his knees before him and especially a man like this, a rich man, because the whole point of being rich is that you do not have to count how to other people. So what does he want? Is somebody sick? Is he sick? He really must want something from Jesus and he must want it bad. Good teacher, he says, not just teacher but good teacher, he is showing Jesus respect, maybe too much respect because after all only God is good. Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? So nobody is sick. He has a question, a religious question and it's a good question. It's a question that deserves a serious answer, so obviously he is a pious young man. We have to ask ourselves, is this a trick? Is he trying to trip Jesus up like the Pharisees? No, I don't think so. He is a genuine guy, he is genuinely interested in spiritual things, he is inwardly dissatisfied, he longs for a deeper, more fulfilling knowledge of God, he has a sense that there must be something more, but he doesn't know what. And I think I'm justified in saying that because of Mark's comment in verse 21 that Jesus looked at this man and loved him, loved him and you never hear of Jesus loving the Pharisees or loving the scribes. The Lord Jesus could see right into this man's heart and knew that his longing, his thirsting was genuine. Why do you call me good? Says Jesus, no one is good but God alone. Now some have taken this as an admission by Jesus that he himself is not the one who is good, that he is just a man, a sinner like everybody else, but if that were the case then of course that one statement would contradict everything else we hear from the lips of

Jesus about who he really is. Jesus is challenging the man about his attitude towards him. We could paraphrase it like this, Jesus is saying now my friend is Jews, we know there is only one who is good, only one who has the right to determine what is good and what is not good. So by calling me good are you acknowledging that I am that one? We must not come to the Lord Jesus and ask him what should I do with my life and then just receive his answer as a suggestion. When we listen to Jesus we are listening to the only one who is good.

So Jesus says to the man you know the commandments, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother, it's a standard answer, there's nothing new there, there's nothing profound, there's nothing radical. He points to man to the basics of the faith, to the commandments. Now that man could have just nodded his head, thanked Jesus. Ah you're right, it's as simple and as difficult as that, just keep the command, sorry Jesus for wasting your time and walked away. Or he could have cried out, but I've tried and I've tried and I've tried and I just can't do it, I'm tempted, I fail all the time, I offer my sacrifices, every morning I get up and I resolve to do better, but somehow I just keep breaking the commandments, I need your help. He could have responded in either way, but instead he says, teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy, all these I have kept since I was a boy.

So he's a good clean living sort of chap, what does he expect Jesus to say now? Does he expect Jesus to say something like, be assured then my son, you shall inherit eternal life? Or maybe he's expecting something more mystical from Jesus, maybe he found his religion empty in barren, perhaps he saw through the petty squabbling of the rabbis, all those rules and regulations that were so burdensome, that it had to be more to the worship of God than just endless sacrifices. Maybe he was sickened by the leaders of his community who insisted on collecting the tithes and the offerings and the temple dues being paid, but lined their own pockets and the service of the Roman occupiers. We don't know what he expected Jesus to say, but one thing we can be sure of that what Jesus said is not what he was expecting. And Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him and loved him, loved him, whatever his motives, Jesus loved him, even knowing how he would respond. Jesus loved him. Jesus loved him and therefore did not tell the man what he wanted to hear. Jesus loved him and therefore did not water down the challenge.

Jesus loved him and therefore did not hold back. He told the man what he needed to hear, he told the man what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. One thing you lack says Jesus. Go sell everything you have and give to the poor and then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. I can imagine a long, long pause as what Jesus has just said sinks in. And all the time Jesus is looking at this man, loving this man, smiling at this man. But the Bible says his face fell, disheartened. Literally it says that his face darkened. Like when the sky becomes overcast, the man's face just clouded over. He went away sad because he had great wealth. He had kept all the commandments since his youth. But what about the first commandment? You shall have no other gods before me. Clearly his wealth was his gods. He wanted to know what he should do to inherit eternal life.

[7 : 54] So ask him to make a substantial gift. Ask him to undergo certain privations. Ask him to do some daring deed, risk his life against the heathen Romans, become a martyr, ask him anything but to sell everything. Now if it were me, everything wouldn't be very much. But for him, everything was a lot. He had responsibilities.

Maybe to parents, to servants, to slaves, maybe a wife and children. We don't know. He had a certain status in the community because of his wealth. He was a kind of man that gets elected to school boards and sits on committees, chairs, meetings.

Poor people don't get asked to do those kind of things. If he sold all his possessions, he would lose more than just money. He wanted to inherit eternal life, but not at the expense of his wealth. And had Jesus not said, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. So the young man turns around and he leaves. He had misunderstood the role of God's law in his life. For him, external obedience was enough. All these I have kept. He never understood that these commands, these laws, were merely the skeleton. What the Lord looks for is the flesh and blood of righteousness. End of conversation. Now there's a second conversation. This time between Jesus and the disciples. And as the man walks away,

Jesus turns to his bewildered disciples and he says how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Now we know what he means, don't we? We know enough about the rich to know that wealth can be a trap. Nobody can ever admit to being rich enough. They always want more. And with that, there comes a kind of smugness, a sense of self-satisfaction. Money means power, money means influence. And so it can be really hard for the Gospel, with its message of humility, of weakness, of need. Really hard for the Gospel to penetrate the hearts of the rich. Not that long ago, a colleague of mine was telling me about an experience he had doing some door-to-door visitation. Now he was ministering in a very affluent part of Persia and he said he was approaching a particular drive and he could see the lady of the house in the garden. She was tending the heated pool that contained her tropical fish and behind her was a huge house with a double garage. And he said that as I approached her, I could see you written over her face. I don't need what you are offering. I don't need what you are offering. We know what the Lord Jesus meant, but you know what? The disciples were amazed because to their way of thinking, wealth was a sign of blessing.

Wealth was a sign of God's approval. To be rich was to be free. Free from the worry of, will there be food in the table tomorrow? Free from the fear of being evicted? Free from the burden of debt? To be rich was to be blessed, blessed by God.

[11 : 46] That's why the disciples are amazed. But Jesus says, 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 a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Now a camel was probably the biggest animal they had ever seen. And we all know how hard it is to get some thread through the eye of a needle. It's a brilliant image isn't it? It's a brilliant use of hyperbole, of exaggeration. It's ridiculous, it's comical, and it's effective. Humanly speaking, it's impossible. Well no, one of the disciples then say, who then can we saved? If anybody is going to inherit eternal life, surely it's going to be the rich. If they can give generous donations to the temple, they can distribute arms to the poor, they can build synagogues, and God will notice. They can do the kind of things that will ensure they will inherit eternal life. So if there's no hope for the rich, is there hope for anybody? And it's here that the Lord Jesus makes what must be among the most precious of all His statements. Verse 20, with man this is impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God. It is impossible for man to save himself. Even the rich who can afford to be good, who can afford to be holy, who can make restitution for their wickedness. Salvation is God's work, and God's work alone. Ephesians 2 verses 89, for it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast. So isn't it ironic that it's the man's wealth which everybody thought was God's blessing that was actually keeping him out of heaven? And it's at this point that Peter pipes up verse 28, we have left everything to follow you.

We have left everything to follow you. Do you not just love Peter? You know, he says what everybody else is thinking about, he's the only one who's tactless enough to actually say it out loud. And he's right, he and the other disciples had indeed left everything to follow the Lord. They had done business as fishermen, they'd left all that behind, everything they owned, everyone they held dear was back up north in Galilee. They had done what the Lord had asked them, we have left everything to follow you. And he is reminding the Lord, as if the Lord needs reminding, he is reminding the Lord that he and the other disciples had done exactly what Jesus had asked the rich young man to do. So does that mean that we'll inherit eternal life? What will our reward be? Just hold that thought for a moment, because there's another third conversation going on here and it is a conversation between the Lord and us, between the Lord and ourselves. Is he down through the centuries, Christians have been troubled by what the Lord Jesus said to that young man, that comment about the rich and the camel. And some

Christians throughout history have interpreted the Lord's invitation to that man as normative for all Christians, binding on the whole church, that to be a true follower of Jesus you have to divest yourself of everything. I don't know if you've noticed on the BBC at the moment, they're showing a new dramatised version of Umberto Eco's book, The Name of the Rose. If you haven't seen it, you can get it on iPlayer. Now, The Name of the Rose is really a murder mystery, but the background to the book is the division within the Medieval Church between the Franciscans, followers of Francis of Assisi, who said that you had to take a vow of poverty and all the others who said, well you don't. And of course the other monks and monasteries had accumulated great wealth and they felt very threatened by the Franciscans. They insisted that to be a true follower of Christ, you had to renounce all wealth. Others though, they have felt that the

Lord's challenge was to them alone, not to all Christians. They have heard Jesus speaking to them. I can think of C.T. Stutt, for example. One of the great pioneering mysteries of the 20th century, born into a wealthy family, went to Cambridge, played cricket for England. And when he was called to the mission field, he believed that he should be totally dependent on God and so he got rid of his fortune. But he was engaged at the time, engaged to be married and he actually held back some of his money to pay for the wedding. But his fiancée wrote to him and told him that she wasn't going to marry a man who didn't obey God 100%. So he gave the rest away as well. And of course they lived to prove that God is no one's data. What is the Lord Jesus saying to you today? Put yourself in the young man's shoes. We approach Jesus and we approach him respectfully, of course we do. We want to speak to him. Maybe we want to know how to inherit eternal life. Maybe we want to know how to be a real Christian. But maybe there's something else. Maybe we're looking for guidance. Maybe we have a prayer request either for ourselves or somebody else. But Jesus, there's something we want you to do. Now we're not likely to say good teacher, we're more likely to say dear Lord, dear Lord Jesus. What does Jesus say back? Before giving us any kind of answer, Jesus wants to get something straight. Why do you call me good? Why do you call me Lord? You're attributing to Jesus some kind of status.

Do you really mean it? Do you really mean it? That rich man addressed Jesus in a way that was normally reserved only for God. Jews seldom referred to anybody else as good. Only God is good. But when Jesus said something to that young man that was going to impact on his life, something that would interfere with his plans, something that would challenge his identity, he was not willing to act as if Jesus really were the one who is good. And he walked away. Before any of us can go any further with Jesus, before we can start saying to him what direction do you want me to take, before we start presenting him with our prayers and our petitions, before are we willing to go beyond lip service, are we willing to act as if Jesus is our Lord? Because that's what he wants. That's what he's looking for. Jesus wants more than common courtesy from his friends and he wants us to go beyond obeying the commandments. Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal. Christians don't have a monopoly on good behavior. Muslims and

[20 : 30] Buddhists and atheists can behave well. We cannot dare reduce the Christian faith to a question of morality. If we do, we're misrepresenting the Gospel and actually we're insulting others at the same time. Why did Jesus have to die on the cross if it's just a matter of being good? Lord we say, what must I do? If you expect him to tell you just to carry on the way you are, just to keep on living the way you're living now, just keep on being a good person which you undoubtedly are. You're in for a surprise my friend. You're in for a surprise. Do you hear the Lord Jesus saying to you, sell everything you have and give your possessions to the poor? Maybe yes, maybe no. But I tell you this, I know exactly what he is saying to every single one of us. He is saying, come follow me. Come follow me. To everyone who would inherit eternal life, to everyone who would be his disciple, Jesus says the same, come follow me. And that means leaving behind anything that will hold you back, anything that will prevent you following, anything that will come between you and Jesus. And it might be in money, I don't know. It's more likely to be something else, someone else. I don't know your heart, I don't know you. But is there something in your life, something that competes with the living God for your wholehearted attention and your wholehearted affection, arrival? Well if you're going to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, it will have to go. You'll have to do without it. Is the Lord speaking to you today about this? And if you say to me, how will I know? How will I know that the Lord is speaking to me?

Because you've already thought of something and your face fell. You've already thought of something and you cannot imagine life without it. Am I making being a Christian too hard? Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God? Not my words, not my words. Let's just go back as we draw to a conclusion to that conversation between Jesus and the disciples. We have left everything to follow you. And do you notice that Jesus doesn't rebuke Peter? I mean it sounds like he's boasting. But you see the Lord Jesus knew that Peter and the others had left everything for him and they needed to know they had done the right thing. They needed some encouragement. I tell you the truth Jesus says, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age home's brothers sisters mothers children fields and with them persecutions and in the age to come eternal life. You see the Lord Jesus promises that when we leave everything for his sake, when we cut the bonds of affection with whatever keeps us face down and earth bound, we will not fail. We will not fail to receive a hundred times more, in other words more than you can count in this life as well as the next because God is no one's data. How will you leave this church today? Are you going to walk out those doors sad and downcast or will you leave knowing that having surrendered all to Jesus, you will you will inherit eternal life and innumerable blessings here. The peace that only

Jesus can give the joy of the Holy Spirit, the love of God's spirit abroad in your heart and a family to belong to a God you can address as father a savior whose name is Jesus. Is that possible? Is that possible? With man this is impossible but not with God. All things are possible with God. Let's pray. As we bow humbly before you dear Lord, we give you thanks and praise that you are the God of the impossible. Lord there will be some of us here today who can recognise just how true that is that before you stepped into our lives the very idea that we would own Christ as our Lord was ludicrous, impossible but you did the impossible in our lives and we thank you, we praise you for that and we ask you Lord to grant us the faith that perseveres, perseveres in the light of the knowledge that you are no one's data and that you continue to do the impossible. We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.