

MARK 10:17-31 – FOLLOWING AND IDENTIFYING WITH CHRIST

Introduction

The degree plan that I am currently seeking is officially titled *the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities*, but it has also been referred to as a *History of Ideas* course. We study the seminal ideas that have shaped our society from Plato and Aristotle to Marx and Freud. The idea is that, when one understands the ideas that have influenced their culture and how they stand in opposition to Christianity, that one might be better able to discern which of their own ideas are truly Christian and which of them are influenced by culture. I have become convinced that, if we want to understand a person's true identity, what makes them who they are below the surface, we have to find out to which worldview they are subscribing. The famous Catholic scholar, G.K. Chesterton, put it this way:

“There are some people—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe. We think that for a landlady considering a lodger it is more important to know his income, but still more important to know his philosophy. We think that for a general about to fight an enemy it is more important to know the enemy's numbers, but still more important to know the enemy's philosophy. We think the question is not whether the theory of the cosmos affects matters, but whether in the long run anything else affects them.”¹

I lifted this quote from William James' book called *Pragmatism* (pg. 7), in which James' attempts to show his readers that any truth is really only as valid as its value in concrete experience. If a tree fell in the woods and no one was there to hear it, James would likely have said that it made no noise because its “noise” had no real value in concrete experience. Yet, James' worldview is just one among many competing for our allegiance in this modern age. There are so many others whom we could follow: Utilitarianism, Materialism, Darwinism, Marxism, Kantianism, Humanism, Thomism, Platonism, etc.

Today, let us examine an interaction that Jesus had with a man who followed after riches and self at the expense of his soul. He found his identity in his own self-righteousness, and saw no value in identifying himself with the only truly righteous Man to have ever existed: Jesus Christ. Jesus will teach us that true, biblical discipleship involves the reshaping of one's identity, this reshaping is impossible apart from God's sovereign intervention, it comes with costs and benefits, and it has a great reversal as its end.

¹⁷*As He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal*

life?” ¹⁸And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments, ‘DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.’” ²⁰And he said to Him, “Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up.” ²¹Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, “One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me.” ²²But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.

²³And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, “How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!” ²⁴The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶They were even more astonished and said to Him, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷Looking at them, Jesus said, “With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God.”

²⁸Peter began to say to Him, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You.” ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake ³⁰but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions, and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last, first”(Mark 10:17-31).²

Setting the Scene

Jesus’ Journey to the Cross. Jesus’ ministry took place primarily in three regions: Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, all of which existed between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. However, there were times when He would venture beyond the bounds of these three interconnected lands. Where we pick up in our story, Jesus has just left Galilee and is making His final journey into Jerusalem. He began His journey by attempting to pass through Samaria. When He was turned away in one Samaritan city, however, He decided to cross the river and journey south on the side opposite the land of Samaria. This was not an unusual custom for Jewish people. Jewish people would often bypass Samaria on the east side of the Jordan, as they saw the Samaritan people as lower than dogs.

Jesus, here, has just finished speaking to large crowds of people just across the Jordan from Jerusalem and is now setting out to make His final journey to that Judean capital. Within a week’s time, Jesus would be betrayed, falsely condemned, beaten, spit on, mocked, whipped, and forced to carry a large wooden cross outside the city. Nailed to

that cross, Jesus would suffer for three hours, bleed, and die.

Discipleship as the Alteration of Identity

The Right Confession. As Jesus was setting out on His final journey to the cross, a rich, young man ran up and knelt before Him, and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” Now, at the point that this young man ran up to Jesus, Jesus had just finished speaking to some large crowds. It appears as though, like Nicodemus in John 3, this religious ruler (as Matthew describes him) wanted to have a somewhat more private audience with Jesus, so he waits for Jesus to remove Himself from the crowds and start out on the road, just as Nicodemus waited for nightfall.

Jesus picks up on two things in the man’s question that I am not fully convinced the man even knew he had included: the young man identified Christ as being good and suggested that his own identity was lacking what was necessary for entrance into heaven. He called Jesus *Good Teacher* and asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This initial question is a good one. He rightly identifies Christ as good, and he rightly suggests that he lacks goodness in his own identity. However, his confession takes on a new nature when Christ puts him on the defense.

Notice that Jesus replies, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, ‘DO NOT MURDER, DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, DO NOT STEAL, DO NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS, Do not defraud, HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER.’” Jesus wants the man to recognize that what he has said is true. Jesus is good, and in other places even calls Himself the Good Shepherd, but by stating this he should also recognize that Jesus is God. By comparison, the rich, young ruler is far from good. Jesus gave him the Law in order to unpack this truth.

As James says, “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:23-25). Now, James is here speaking of the believer’s relationship with the law, which ought to have a sanctifying affect drawing him closer to God, but this principle has implications for unbelievers as well. The Law reveals to believers and unbelievers alike the holy nature of God. For the unbeliever, this Law brings about condemnation, humiliation, conviction and, when working in conjunction with the gospel, repentance. For the believer, the Law reveals to us the goodness and righteousness of our heavenly Father drawing us closer to Him and compelling us to love Him and seek to imitate Him all the more.

The Altered Confession. Christ’s method is not meant, however, to be a one-size-

fits-all approach. This method, though it is the right method of evangelism, does not always yield repentance, just as the right method of parenting does not always yield godly children. We follow in the Master's footsteps, because it is His way, not because it works. And it should bring us some comfort to know that His method did not always accomplish repentance in those on whom He used it. If the ungodly do not repent, we need not blame ourselves or our methods if we are doing what the Lord did.

Notice that Christ's response had a reversing effect on the rich, young ruler. Notice that he goes from confessing the goodness of Christ to merely referring to Him as *teacher*. He went from acknowledging his lack of qualification to enter the kingdom of heaven to promoting himself to one who has kept every letter of the law. He has gone from being the humble one who runs to Jesus and kneels down to being the one who lies in the face of the Sovereign Lord of the Universe.

The Altered Identity. However, Christ knows that the man's true identity is found in his idols, so He tells him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; and come, follow Me." Jesus essentially tells the man that his identity is not found in the righteousness of the letter of the law. Rather, his identity is found in his possessions: his idols. Jesus tells him that he must forsake this identity and follow after Christ, identifying himself with his new Master. The man, knowing that he has been found out and having no desire to forsake his idols, lowers his head and walks away.

Notice what we skipped, though. Mark says, "Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him..." Now, many people have sought to answer the question of how it is that Jesus loves a man who is not elect and apparently on his way to hell while he is presently lying to Jesus' face. At the very least, we can say that Christ loved him by allowing him to breathe his next breath. Let us not forget that Christ, even in His humanity, is still fully God. However, I believe that there is another way in which Christ loved the man. He took pity on him and told him what he must do to be saved. Look closely at these commands. He is told to get rid of his idols and to follow Christ. To say it simply, Jesus tells the man to repent and believe in Him.

Here we find the definition of true, biblical discipleship; believers are to forsake their idols and follow after Jesus Christ. We forsake our idols, because they ensnare us and they offend God. We follow Christ, because we desire to know Him above all things and to be known by Him. Turn with me to Philippians 3:7ff:

"But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the

fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:7-11; NASB).

A true disciple is first and foremost a disciple of Christ, seeking to shed all worldly passions and lusts, and all things that so easily ensnare us, and to follow after Him. A true disciple desires above all to know and be known by Christ. This comes by walking in close intimate fellowship with Christ in the Spirit. As Paul teaches in Galatians 5:16, “But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh” (NASB). Let us then seek to know Christ and to be known by Him.

The Impossibility of Repentance and Faith

Repentance is Impossible for Man. Jesus does not hesitate to turn this event into an occasion to teach. Here, He gradually introduces the disciples to the impossibility of this discipleship. In verse 23, He tells them that it will be hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Rightly, they are amazed that He has said this. The rich, in Jesus’ day were considered to be the most likely to enter heaven because they had the ability to give more to God. Jesus counters this logic and says that it will be hard for them to enter the kingdom.

Perceiving their amazement, Jesus broadens His statement to include all people. In verse 24, Jesus tells them, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus has now generalized His statement to include all people. Just as the rich have the propensity to set up their money and their possessions as idols, so everyone else is inclined to do with other things. One does not have to idolize money in order to place a master above God. Jesus takes this concept even further. After hearing that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven, Jesus’ disciples ask Him, “Then who can be saved?” They understood. The rich young ruler was no longer the subject. They had their own sins to deal with. At this point, Jesus tells them, “With people it is impossible.”

This was ultimately the problem with the rich young ruler, and it may even be the problem in some of our hearts today. The rich young ruler wanted to do that which was necessary to get him to heaven, but he wanted to accomplish it in the flesh. Jesus counters this thought very quickly. He tells his disciples that they cannot turn from their sins on their own. They need something else. They need God.

God Grants Repentance. Thus, He says, “but not with God; for all things are possible with God.” When I was eleven years old, I walked an aisle, prayed a prayer and got dunked in an over-sized bathtub, but nothing changed in my life. In fact, I found myself indulging more and more in the flesh as I got older. I recall sitting in church, listening to the gospel, and thinking, “I want to forsake my sins. I know I can’t be saved and living like this, but this sin has become such a part of my identity that, if I forsake it,

I won't know who I am or what I am supposed to do." For this very reason, I came up with a whole theology of grace that basically allowed me to live like the devil and assume that I was a child of God. What a fool I was.

The good news is, however, that God has provided a way for people like me. Jesus says that though repentance is impossible for man, God can make it possible. In Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul reminds the church at Ephesus of their spiritual state before they came to Christ. In verse one, he tells them, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins." The rich young ruler, then, was dead in his trespasses and sins and therefore wholly incapable of turning from his sin. But thanks be to God through His Son, Jesus Christ, that he has not left us in the tomb, but has called us forth to live a life of victory over sin and death.

The Costs and Benefits of Identifying with Christ

Count the Cost. Now, having witnessed all that had just transpired, Peter told Jesus, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You." Peter gets it. The disciples had left homes and families and friends and occupations to follow Christ. This is a fact of Christianity. No one comes to faith in Christ without having to give up something. However, in verses 29 & 30, Jesus tells His disciples, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms."

Thus, the call to leave behind all that hinders you from following Christ is not without its rewards. If you leave anything to follow Christ, you are promised that you will receive back a hundred fold in this life. The question is, in what way ought you to expect that you will receive back these things? I would argue that the context in which you receive back these things is twofold: Christ and the local church. In the two great commandments, we are commanded to love God and love others. What we find when we obey these principles within the assembly of God's people is that we are loved by God and we are loved by others in return. Let us never for a moment forget that Christ is a person and the church is made up of people. When we say we love Christ and His church, we are not primarily speaking of our infatuation with biblical doctrine and ecclesial systems. We are talking about persons.

When you turn from your sins and follow after Christ, the Bible teaches that you have been adopted into the family of Christ. You have a new family with all new brothers and sisters and mothers. But what about the houses and farms? Well, many have left their belongings in order to follow after God's will for their life as well. For those people, they can be assured that they will never be in need.

God's people are to be a benevolent people. As long as a man is frugal with his money, he is working or seeking work, and he is truly seeking to provide for his family, there is no reason that the church should ever deny him any assistance that he may need.

Sure he could always seek more work, but at what cost? At the cost of never seeing his family and, thus, not properly leading his family? A man should never be forced to deprive his family of spiritual leadership in the home for the sake of providing them with the bare necessities of life. The church should intervene long before it ever comes to that.

So, in this life, we see that there are benefits to following Christ. However, there is one cost to following Christ, and it is not an easy one to swallow. Jesus says that we will receive all of these things “along with persecutions.” If we are truly following after Christ, we will be persecuted. Let me repeat that. If we are truly following after Christ, we will be persecuted. There are people in China, India, North Korea, and many Muslim nations throughout the world that are being killed for their faith as we meet here today. Because Christ loved these people so much to come to earth and die for them, they are willing to die for Him, and this is not uncommon in countries throughout the world. Let us never assume, simply because we do not experience tribulation in America, that there is not a great tribulation being experienced by the church at large.

Let us also remember that our enemy hates God. If you are a Christian, you have a double target on your back. First, you are made in God’s image, which was enough to provoke Satan to tempt Adam and Eve to rebel against God. Second, you are identified with Christ. Satan knows he cannot defeat Christ. He tried in the wilderness, and he failed miserably. However, he will seek to defeat, if possible, even the elect.

Benefits in the Life to Come. Finally, Jesus tells His disciples that, in the age to come, those who turn from their idols to follow Him will inherit eternal life and, also, the first will be last and the last will be first. Jesus here wants His disciples to see that while following Him on this earth may yield both costs and benefits, in the life to come, there are only benefits. Ultimately, Christ wants His disciples to see the superior nature of the life to come. He wants them to have an eternal perspective.

Nearly all of Jesus’ disciples would meet horrible deaths at the hands of people who hated them because they hated Christ. However, His disciples willingly died in this way because they had an eternal perspective. First of all, they recognized what Christ had done for them. If Christ loves us so much as to come to earth and die for our sins, how much more should that incline us to follow after Him even to death if necessary? Secondly, Jesus wanted His disciples to recognize that there is a prize to come. We get to spend all of eternity with Him in paradise. There is not a more glorious thought to ponder in the whole universe.

The Final Reversal of Identity

Jesus leaves His disciples with this final statement: “But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.” This serves as a reminder to Christ’s disciples that they are always to remain humble. In Christ’s kingdom, one should never seek glory for oneself. Rather, they should seek to bring glory to God. In doing so, they will have much treasure stored up for them in heaven.

Ultimately, the principle of vs. 31 is that Christians must be willing to give up every idol and become the least among their earthly brethren if they desire to have any prestige in the life to come. Those who are last on this earth will be first in heaven. Thus, one must take on the humility that Christ demonstrated in His incarnation if they are to be exalted with Him in the resurrection (Philippians 2:1-11).

Conclusion

If Christ was willing to leave His privileged position in heaven and subject Himself to the humiliation He suffered on this earth for the sake of rebellious, unworthy sinners like you and me, how much more should we be willing to forsake our idols, follow after, and identify with Him. Please allow me to leave you with a verse from a song that we all know that I think aptly illustrates this truth:

“Oh, that old rugged cross so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above,
To bear it to dark Calvary.
So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it someday for a crown.”

END NOTES

¹James, William. *Pragmatism*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981.

²All Bible quotations are from the *New American Standard Version of the Bible*.