

# BodyLife Past Article Archive

## The Businessman and the Begger

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BodyLife • March 1998

Two men approached Jesus on his last journey to Jerusalem--a businessman and a beggar.

The first was a righteous man who had meticulously kept the law all of his life. He only wanted to ensure that his efforts would be enough to secure him eternal life. Tragically, he went away deeply grieved and broken, his request unsatisfied.

The other was a beggar--blind since birth. When he heard Jesus was near he called out for help. People around him tried to silence him, but he shouted above them anyway. However, he was part of an incredible miracle that not only restored his sight, but saved his soul.

What made the difference? Why did one receive from Jesus and one did not? And why was it that the one we would more naturally deem less worthy found the answer he sought?

I find such contrasts intriguing. There's nothing more I want in my life than to receive freely of God's life--his wisdom, power and love--in every situation. When I see one man walking away from Jesus grieved and another rejoicing, I want to know why.

Rarely a day passes where I am not looking to Father for help in my own circumstances and for people he has related me to. Sometimes his wisdom or provision seems clear and effortless. At other times I struggle for weeks or months, calling out to him, examining myself trying to figure out what I might be doing wrong that blocks his work in me or through me.

But it does seem the harder I try to make something happen, the further I get from God's provision. Do you ever feel that way? If so, we both have something wonderful to learn from Jesus' encounter with the businessman and the beggar. (You'll find them both in Mark 10--the rich young ruler in verses 17-31 and Bartimaeus in verses 46-52.)

What we'll discover is not that Jesus loved one more than the other; nor that he gave to one and not the other. For he graciously gave to both of them. It's just that one recognized it and one did not and the difference between the two gives us incredible insight into how we can relate to Jesus every day of our lives.

## Caught In The Do-Dos

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The rich man's question sounded innocent enough; even humble. How much more compliant could anyone be? He wanted eternal life and wanted to know what he had to do to get it.

Jesus immediately answers his query by referring him to the commandments.

The rich man's answer gives us a look into his heart. "I have kept all of these from my youth up."

Really? Had he? Paul the Apostle said that no man has ever kept all of God's law--that if even one person could have earned his or her way into God's life by the law, then Christ died in vain.

No, he had not kept the law, what was most critical here was that he thought he had. Since he was a little child he had worked hard to keep the law in hopes of earning his place with God. But the fact that he is still seeking eternal life makes it clear that he hadn't found it yet, nor was he secure that his current course would produced it in the future.

This man was steeped in his own works. That was evident by the question he had asked Jesus at the outset. The "I" and the "do" gave him away. He was focused on himself and his ability and resources. He was trying to earn what could only be a gift. His efforts would continue to fail.

How much Jesus wanted him to understand that! Mark specifically mentions that Jesus looks on this man and felt a deep love for him. What did he see? Did he see a little boy trying to be perfect as the only way to earn his father's affirmation? Did he see the years of fruitless labor that still held periodic failures that had to be covered up to maintain his illusion of righteousness? Did he see the gnawing in the young man's stomach born of his obsessive drive to perfection that was destroying him from within?

Probably he saw all that and more and Jesus intended to help him see it too. His next response seems on the surface to be one of Jesus' most difficult sayings: "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." On hearing the words, the businessman's countenance fell. Unable to do what had just been asked of him, he walks away in grief.

I've taught this parable so many times, and with unwitting arrogance railed at the rich man's inability to do what Jesus asked of him. What a fool! He was too greedy to follow Jesus. But that was not the lesson. Who of us would have come to this kingdom if those were the terms? How many people would have come streaming forward at Billy Graham crusades if the price of salvation had been to sell everything in your possession give it to the poor and then come forward? I don't even know one person who came to Christ on those terms and I don't know that many of us who would stay if that's what he required of us!

But that was not Jesus' point. He had something far better in mind.

## **Raising the Bar**

If you want to train a high jumper or pole vaulter for the Olympics, you wouldn't start them out by putting the bar at world-record height and have them try to jump until they could clear it. The task would be too daunting. You would start with a height that can be successfully achieved and slowly raise the bar allowing refined technique, practice and conditioning to help the athlete do better.

But that's not what Jesus did here. He put the bar at world-record height at the very beginning. And the businessman did exactly what any athlete would do, he went away discouraged.

But Jesus didn't do it to be mean to him. He raised the bar so high, the man could never get over it, because Jesus wanted him to stop trying. He offered the man an incredible gift--to be free from having to earn God's favor by his efforts. Jesus wanted him free from the "do-dos" to realize that what he could not earn for himself, Jesus would give to him.

All he would have had to do was look Jesus in the eye and say "I don't think I can do that!" To which Jesus might have answered, "Good, now stop doing all the other silly things you're trying to do to earn God's favor. Stop striving; stop pretending, stop trying to earn what you can never earn!"

That's why Jesus specifically notes how difficult it is for people of wealth to find their way into the kingdom. Such people always feel like they can earn it or pay for it. They are so focused on their own efforts and resources that they can't recognize what Jesus can do for them.

Even when Peter started to boast in what they had left to follow him, Jesus reminds him that none of them had left anything that he wasn't going to replace with far more and far better. The fact is they had left their stuff not to earn salvation, but because of a relationship with Jesus that had captured their hearts.

Sadly, we don't get to see the end for this young businessman. My hope would be that Jesus' words finally worked through his heart at some point. But whether they did or didn't, Jesus still offered him an incredible gift, the freedom from having to earn what he could never earn and he missed it!

One other man approached Jesus asking him what he must do to inherit eternal life. This man was an expert in the law and when Jesus asked him what the law said, he answered correctly citing the call to love God with everything we are and our neighbor as ourselves.

Looking for a loophole the man then asked him who his neighbor was. Jesus answers by telling the story of the Good Samaritan--a man who loved across racial and cultural barriers and extended himself at great personal cost of time and money to make sure the man's every need was taken care of. Was Jesus raising the bar again to unattainable heights? I think so.

Isn't it interesting that we teach these two responses of Jesus as actions attainable by dedicated believers?

We can't keep the law, nor can we love others enough to earn our way to this kingdom. Far from offering these as viable options, Jesus was trying to show both men that their best efforts wouldn't work.

That's not to say that as we love him he won't bring us greater freedom from our possessions or greater love for others, for he will do both. But that will rise not out of our attempts to earn his favor, but as grateful responses to the love of a gracious Father.

That's the lesson we will have to learn if we are going to live in his kingdom. He didn't come to form a religion but rather to offer us a relationship with the Father. We will never earn one thing from his hand. But relationship isn't about earning, it's about loving. He loves us so much that he does all the work for us.

### **"Do I Have To?"**

To understand Jesus' invitation to the kingdom we must understand it relationally not religiously. He wasn't inviting people to a rigid ethic or ceremonial rituals. He invited people to relationship. Those that engage the relationship will live transformed lives, but often those who only conform their outward behavior miss out on the depth of relationship that Father wants to have with them.

"Do I have to to be saved?" That was the most frequently-asked question I receive from people who seek the Lord's wisdom, but have not discovered him relationally. What they are seeking to uncover is minimal salvation. I don't want to do one bit more than is absolutely necessary to get what I want.

This is just like a son telling his father that he really doesn't want to to spend time with him unless he has to to ensure that he won't be disinherited. Can you imagine how that son would respond to a dinner invitation from his father? "If I don't, Dad, will you cut me out of the will?"

What answer could the father give to that question. None would really suffice, since the question misses the whole point of relationship and will always leave us short of Father's desire for us. He has the best goodies in all the universe, but the person who seeks his things without desiring to know him misses out on the real life of the kingdom.

That's what people are saying who wonder if they must do one thing or another or risk losing their salvation. They don't want one drop more of God's life than the minimum required to escape the flames of hell. How tragic! No wonder they missed the best gift God could give them, and why Jesus wanted so desperately to free them from the tyranny of trying to earn eternal life by their own religious efforts.

### **"Lord, Have Mercy!"**

Bartimaeus sat by the road and begged. As a blind man in that society he had few other options. On one

incredible day he heard a great commotion coming toward him on the road. When he inquired he found out that Jesus the Nazarene was coming that way with a great throng of people. Bartimaeus had already heard enough about this teacher from Galilee, to know that he might be able to help him. He began to call out instantly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

People nearby were embarrassed by his shouts and sternly told him to keep quiet. But that only made Bartimaeus cry out even louder. Finally Jesus heard his plea and called for him. Bartimaeus had one simple request: "I want to regain my sight."

Notice he doesn't ask what he needed to do to see again. He did not barter based on his righteousness. He didn't ask for what he could do to earn his healing. He simply put all of his confidence in the mercy of the man sent from God.

That was enough. Jesus didn't ask him to sell all he had. Jesus didn't tell him to go love the people he hated most. Jesus healed him and noted that Bartimaeus' simple focus was all that was needed. "Go, your way; your faith has saved you." He not only received healing, but salvation as well.

Do you get it? Approach God on the basis of your own efforts and you will always be disappointed. Trust him for mercy we could never deserve and you'll find his grace flow through you like a raging river. It's the strangest of things: Try to do enough to earn God's favor and you will ensure that you will fall painfully short no matter how much you do. Accept his mercy, however, and you will end up enjoying his life and doing the very things that please him most.

In Luke 18:9-17, Jesus tells a parable that captures this lesson perfectly. A Pharisee and a tax-collector entered the temple. The Pharisee delighted in his righteousness--how he was more committed than anyone else he knew. He even puffed himself up at the expense of the tax-gatherer praying nearby. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people...even like this tax collector."

That's what living by our own works produces. Since we'll never be good enough on our own we will seek to justify ourselves by being better than other believers around us. To create that facade we have to focus on their weaknesses and hold them in contempt. Any time we set ourselves above other people, we only prove that we are not walking in God's mercy. We are trying to earn what we never can. At times like that we need to see the bar that Jesus raised so high we could never get over it no matter how much better we think ourselves than others.

Then, melting before him we can like the tax-collector fall on our knees, "God, be merciful to me!" It was this man who went home in right standing with God, not the one who had sacrificed for all his religious activities.

Is that incredible? The key to walking out the life of Jesus is to trust his love, not to earn it. Each day I can

gratefully acknowledge Father's mercy and receive whatever he has for me.

Unless God works in me today, in spite of my weaknesses and failures, I really have no hope at all.

But he does.

And therefore I do!

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