

“The One Thing You Lack”

The Gratitude Campaign – part #2

Mathew 19:16-22

I like to think that I was a pretty good student. When I took tests, I like to get a score of 100%. If I did not, I would pour back over my exams to find which questions I missed. I firmly believed that if I knew the material that the teacher or professor was teaching, I mean, really, really knew it by heart, then I should have been able to reiterate it perfectly. That’s probably why I was better at math than English. English was the only class in high school I didn’t get an “A” in, because English normally wasn’t graded with a multiple choice exam.

Now, life is not a test, and neither is faith. But sometimes we treat it that way. We tend to think of the Christian faith as a list of “DO’s” and “DO NOT’s.” And when life gets us down, and we get feelings of discontentment, we try to look for the thing we are doing wrong or not doing. We chase after stuff that we hope will relieve that anxiety and give us peace and security. We ask, “What is that one thing that will make me happy?” Of course, advertisements promise all sorts of cures. Just watch the TV for five minutes. It is amazing what companies promise you. It seems that an easier life, with better cars, better kitchen appliances, and better houses, is all just one purchase away. Yet, the truth is, all these things which promise contentment instead create more anxiety, causing us to overstretch our budgets, fill up our garages, rob us of our time, and deepen our discontentment.

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could just find the one thing to make us happy? The one thing we lack? Is that even possible?

That is partly the young Jewish man’s mentality when he approaches Jesus in Matthew 19. I commend him: he is doing the right thing by going to Jesus. If you want answers, Christ is a great teacher to ask. This was the prevailing thought of the day: if you had a problem, you went and found a well-respected Rabbi and asked your questions. And in typical teacher fashion, you would probably get a question in return. Good teachers should never be content to just rattle off an answer.

The young man has a great question, one which we are really all asking in one way or another. “What must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus asks a question in return. “Why are you asking me?”

I’m pretty sure that question was rhetorical. At least, it sounds that way to us today. “Jesus, you’re the Son of God, the Messiah. If nothing else, you’re a miracle worker and an incredible teacher. Who else I am going to ask about eternal life?” Yes, I submit that Jesus is the right person to ask.

What does Jesus say to the man? “Keep the commandments.”

That seems like a straightforward answer, and it really fits my learning style. It wasn’t enough for the young man, who asks for clarification. “Which ones?” Come on, Jesus, give me the cheat sheet, the Cliff Notes, or the study guide. I must have missed that lecture.

An interesting Jewish tradition says that there are 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. It is called the “mitzvoh,” and according to tradition, this idea has been around since at least the 3rd century AD. 613 laws! That’s a long test! The young man isn’t being cheeky with Jesus. He really wants to know. And clearly, he does know these 613 commands. He wants a better, simpler answer. He wants the opinion of this famous rabbi, Jesus.

But Jesus doesn't give him 613 laws. In fact, his list seems very incomplete. Jesus only lists a handful of commands: “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.” These are recognizable from the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). But it's missing some important stuff. Where is “Love the Lord your God and worship him only”? It seems strange to me that Jesus' entire list is just laws about loving your neighbor. Maybe that's the point. If this man already loves God, it might be obvious. Yet Jesus is asking, how much do you love your neighbor?

The man responds, “I'm a straight A student. I've done all of this.” He has checked the boxes, crossed his t's and dotted his i's. But he knows it's not enough. His discontentment is driving him to his knees, literally, this same story in Mark 10 starts with the man falling on his knees before Christ. (Mark 10:17) That is really saying something, since Luke identifies not only as a rich man, but a ruler. (Luke 18:18)

Have you ever wanted something in life so badly, you were on your knees? We don't do this much today. I try to remember to kneel before every worship service to ask God to bless our church and guide our worship. Going down on your knees is an act of submission and humility. It means, “I'm not worthy to stand in your presence.”

According to Matthew, the man says, “I have done all these. What do I lack?” Mark and Luke write that Jesus says, “There is one thing you still lack.” It doesn't really matter who said it – they were both thinking it. This man had a deep need to fill. And getting a list of 613 commands to obey wasn't the answer.

While this story is pretty much the same in all three gospels, Mark writes one crucial statement that the other two omit. Before answering, Jesus looked the man in the eyes and loved him – Jesus had great compassion for him. (Mark 10:21) The rich young man was being vulnerable before Christ. The man was honoring Jesus, sincerely asking a question that could change his life. This was a tender moment, and Jesus was not going to let the man off the hook.

Here it is: the one thing you lack. Listen closely.

The man’s possessions controlled his life. Jesus told him, “sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”” (Matthew 19:21) Boom, there’s your answer.

The Bible says that the man grieved. He went away sad. (Matthew 19:22) This was too much to ask. His possessions had more control over him than he knew. He could not give those things up and follow Jesus, even though he knew he should. That’s why he went away sad. I think Jesus grieved for him, too. The truth hurts.

Look, this rich young man was generous. He read his Bible; he knew how God feels about the poor. According to Rick Warren, there are over 2000 verses in the Bible about giving to the poor. For example, Deuteronomy 15:7-8 – “Do not harden your heart or shut your hand from your poor brother, instead...open your hand to him and freely loan him whatever he needs.” And Deuteronomy 15:11 “For there will never cease to be poor in the land; that is why I am commanding you to open wide your hand to your brother and to the poor and needy in your land.” This young man knew these verses, probably by heart.

This man was giving to the poor. He had to be. He said that he obeyed all the commandments. But maybe he was doing it reluctantly, without giving his

whole heart to God. And the man knew it. The one thing that he was lacking was complete and total surrender of his wealth to God, so that he could follow Jesus unencumbered. But he could not bring himself to make that step. Instead, he walked away.

Church, you don't have to walk away from Jesus. You don't have to be like this man, unwilling to give up his possessions, his wealth, his life to Christ. I don't want you to leave today with this man's image in your mind. That is why I have invited Bob and Yolanda Ayala to share their testimonies today, to explain why they have chosen to follow Christ and put their wealth in God's hands through the ministry of this church.

Bob and Yolanda Ayala testimony.

Are you grateful for all that God has given you? You may not feel rich, but you are. There are billions of people around the world that would trade places with you in a heartbeat, simply to have food on the table and a roof over their heads. God calls us to give our possessions away. We can only do that if we are grateful, not if we treat faith like taking a test or buying a golden ticket to heaven. The only way to please God is to be obedient. The only contentment we will find is in surrender. It can be scary to drop money in the offering plate, because you are surrendering control of it. You are putting it in God's hands.

All of us lack one thing, and Jesus tells us what it is: 100% obedience to God, including surrendering control over our possessions. The question is, will we listen?

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Luke 6:38, NIV

“Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever thought your faith could be summed up as “just trying to pass the test”? What experiences and teaching lead you to your conclusion?
2. What questions do you have that you wish you could ask Jesus? Would he give you a simple answer in return? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think the young man was dissatisfied with life? Do you think Jesus was fair in answering him? Why or why not?
4. Do you use your wealth to store up treasures in heaven? How?
5. What is the one thing that you lack? What is the most difficult sacrifice or control you must give up to follow Jesus? Will you do it?