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Sell What You Have

"You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" – Mark 10:21

Summary: the context of Jewish laws and the man who asked the question – what it does not mean – not all Jesus' followers asked to do this – but a regular feature in Jesus' teaching – Luke 12:33-34 – Matthew 6:19-21 – intended for Jesus's followers in general – the difficulty with earthly riches – a law of life.

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The man to whom these words were spoken certainly found them hard to hear. He was the rich man who came to Jesus and asked what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said, "Well, you know the commandments" and he mentioned those which sum up one's duty to a neighbour.

The Jews knew that keeping the commandments was the way to life. It is stated in the law itself: *"You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, by doing which a man shall live, I am the Lord"* (Leviticus 18:5). The man answered that he had kept all these from early days.

But he plainly expected Jesus to say something more. He did not come to him just to learn that keeping the commandments was the way to life. And Jesus was quick to present something more: *"There is one thing you haven't done,"* Jesus said, *"and you can do it now: sell your property, give the poor the money you get for it, and come and join my disciples. You will get rid of the burden of material goods, and you will be laying up treasure in heaven."* But the man found this counsel too hard to accept.

It is sometimes called a counsel of perfection, from the way in which another evangelist phrases it: *"If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor"* (Matthew 19:21). But this does not mean that keeping the commandments is the duty of every Christian, but that giving all their goods to feed the poor is the privilege of those who would attain a higher level of devotion. Paul reminds us that even giving all our goods to feed the poor is worthless without love in the heart (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Matthew's wording might be rendered: "If you want to go the whole way in fulfilling the will of God, this is what you must do." For those who wish to treat the teaching of Jesus seriously and make it, as far as possible, their rule of life, this is still a hard saying. It is easy to say, "this is how he tested one man's devotion," but he did not ask all his hearers to give away their property in the same way.

It is true that those who joined his company and went around with him as his disciples appear to have left all to follow him. But what about those friends who helped Jesus and his disciples – those well-to-do women who, as Luke tells us, "Provided for them out of their means" (Luke 8:3)? They were not asked to make the sacrifice that our rich man was asked to make. It might be said, of course, that they were doing this to some degree by helping Jesus and the twelve out of their resources.

When Jesus invited himself to a meal in the house of the chief tax-collector of Jericho, no pressure apparently was put on Zacchaeus to make his spontaneous announcement: *"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor"* (Luke 19:8). It is usually inferred that this was to be his practice from that time on. At any rate, Jesus recognised him as a *"son of Abraham"* in the true sense, a man of faith. But he did not tell him to get rid of the other half of his goods as well, nor did he suggest that he should quit his tax-collecting and join his company, as another tax-collector had done in Capernaum at an earlier date.

Even so, Jesus's advice to the rich man is by no means isolated; it is a regular feature of his teaching. The same note is struck in words appearing without a narrative context in Luke *"Sell your possessions and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fall, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"* (12:33-34).

Matthew includes the same message in his version of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19-21), in a rhythmical form which may have been designed for easy memorising (in the Aramaic in which they were spoken):

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume, and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

This teaching was not given to one special individual, but it was intended for Jesus's followers in general. He urged them to have the

right priorities, to seek God's kingdom and righteousness above all else (Matthew 6:33). But it is very difficult to do this, Jesus maintained, if one's attention is preoccupied by material wealth.

Experience shows that some wealthy men and women have promoted the kingdom of God above their worldly concerns - that they have used their worldly concerns for the promotion of his kingdom. But experience also shows that their number is very small. The concentration on material gain has a negative effect on the Christian experience, because it not only encroaches on the time and energy that might otherwise be devoted to the interests of the kingdom of God, but it makes one less concerned or interested in the kingdom of God, and less disposed to pay attention to kingdom matters.

Naturally then, Jesus was stating a law of life when he said that where one's treasure is, there the heart will be also. He would clearly have liked to enrol the rich man among his disciples, and up to a point the rich man was willing to become a disciple. But the sticking point came when he was asked to unburden himself of his property. He decided however, that he would rather go on bearing the burden of his wealth than become a pilgrim. Jesus's words to him were not intended for him alone; they remain as a challenge, a challenge not to be evaded, for all who wish to be his disciples.