

One Thing You Lack

A Study of Mark 10:17–31

Main Point: The rich man's moral obedience could not secure eternal life because he could not release his possessions to follow Jesus, revealing that salvation is humanly impossible and requires God to do what we cannot—transform hearts that cling to everything except him.

Introduction

He ran. He knelt. He asked the right question. A wealthy man approached Jesus with genuine eagerness, respectful posture, and sincere inquiry: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Everything about him seemed promising. He had kept God’s commandments from childhood. He addressed Jesus with honor. He wanted what Jesus was offering.

Then Jesus looked at him and loved him—and issued a demand that made the man’s face fall. Sell everything. Give to the poor. Follow me. The sincere inquirer walked away grieving, unable to accept the terms. His possessions held him more firmly than his desire for eternal life.

The disciples watched in astonishment. If this man—moral, earnest, blessed with wealth—could not enter the kingdom, who could? Jesus’ answer was stunning: no one. With man this is impossible. The rich cannot buy entrance; the moral cannot earn it; the religious cannot perform their way in. Salvation requires God to do what humans cannot.

This passage dismantles every confidence except confidence in God. It exposes the idol we grip most tightly—whatever we cannot imagine surrendering for Jesus’ sake. It promises that sacrifice for Christ is never ultimately loss, that those who leave everything gain far more than they surrendered. But it also warns that the rewards come “along with persecutions” and that many who appear first will end up last. The man who ran to Jesus walked away empty. The nobodies who left everything to follow him would inherit eternal life.

Examination

The man’s approach and question (10:17–18)

As Jesus set out on his journey toward Jerusalem, a man ran up and knelt before him. The posture was respectful—the same approach Mark describes for other positive characters

who came to Jesus in desperation or reverence (Mark 5:22, 33; 7:25). His address was unusual: “Good teacher.” Nowhere else in Mark’s Gospel does anyone address Jesus this way. The combination of running, kneeling, and flattering title suggests genuine eagerness mixed with the habits of someone accustomed to navigating social situations through deference and charm.

His question cut to the heart of Jewish hope: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). “Eternal life” was shorthand for life in the age to come—the resurrection existence promised when God’s reign was fully established. The man believed in this future but was uncertain whether he would share in it. His question was not inherently flawed; Jesus had been teaching about entrance into the kingdom, and asking how to enter was precisely the right inquiry.

Jesus’ response was unexpected: “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). This was not a denial of his own goodness or a theological lecture on divine attributes. Jesus was probing the man’s use of flattery. The rich routinely employed such language to gain leverage in negotiations. Jesus gently waved aside the compliment, signaling that he could not be manipulated by conventional social tactics. More deeply, Jesus was establishing a framework: if only God is truly good, then goodness cannot be achieved through human effort but must come from alignment with God himself.

The commandments and the man’s claim (10:19–20)

Jesus directed the man to Scripture: “You know the commandments” (Mark 10:19). He then listed commandments from the second half of the Decalogue—those governing relationships with other people: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and mother. The order was unusual, and Jesus substituted “do not defraud” for the tenth commandment against coveting. This substitution drew out the practical implications of coveting in behavioral terms—the kind of exploitation and wage-withholding that wealthy landowners often practiced against laborers (Mal. 3:5; James 5:4).

The man’s response was immediate and confident: “Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy” (Mark 10:20). This was not arrogance but honest self-assessment. Taken as rules of conduct, these commandments could be kept. A pious Jew who avoided violence, adultery, theft, and perjury, who honored his parents and dealt fairly in business, could legitimately claim obedience. Paul made a similar claim about his pre-conversion life: “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6). The man was not lying; he was simply unaware of what he still lacked.

Jesus' love and radical demand (10:21–22)

Mark records a detail found nowhere else in the Gospels: “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mark 10:21). This was not a cold setup for failure but a gaze of genuine affection. Jesus saw the man’s sincerity, acknowledged his obedience, and loved him. What followed was not punishment but invitation—though it would feel like both.

“One thing you lack,” Jesus said. The phrase echoed his earlier teaching about children and the kingdom. The man desired eternal life but could not receive it as a child receives—with empty hands and no claim to deserve what is given. Jesus then issued four commands: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). The first three verbs were aorist imperatives—single, decisive actions. The final verb, “follow,” was present tense—an ongoing commitment. Sell once; follow always.

The demand was not arbitrary asceticism but a call to the same discipleship others had already embraced. Peter, Andrew, James, and John left nets and boats when Jesus called (Mark 1:18, 20). Levi left his tax booth (Mark 2:14). Jesus was inviting this man to join the Twelve, to travel with him to Jerusalem, to participate in the mission. The cost was the same for everyone: everything.

The man’s reaction was visible: “his face fell” (Mark 10:22). The Greek suggests shock registering on his features—dismay at what Jesus demanded. He went away grieving, “for he had great wealth.” Mark does not say he rejected Jesus outright; he simply could not accept the terms. His possessions held him more firmly than his desire for eternal life. The sincere, law-abiding man who had kept God’s commands from childhood discovered that his loyalty was not ultimately to God but to his comfortable existence.

Jesus’ teaching on wealth and the kingdom (10:23–27)

Jesus looked around at his disciples and made a pronouncement that astonished them: “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23). The disciples’ amazement reflected common assumptions. In Jewish thought, wealth could signify divine blessing. The rich had resources to give alms, study Torah, and perform good works. If anyone could enter the kingdom, surely they could.

Jesus repeated the statement, broadening it: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:24). The omission of “for the rich” made the difficulty universal. Everyone faces obstacles to entering the kingdom—the rich simply have more of them. Then Jesus returned to the specific case with an image designed to shock: “It is easier for a camel to go

through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25).

Attempts to soften this saying miss the point. Some manuscripts replaced “camel” with “rope.” Medieval interpreters invented a small gate in Jerusalem called “the Needle’s Eye” through which camels could supposedly squeeze if they knelt. But no such gate existed, and the image was deliberately impossible. A camel was the largest animal in Palestine; a needle’s eye was the smallest opening imaginable. Jesus was not describing difficulty but impossibility. From the perspective of human achievement, the rich cannot enter the kingdom.

The disciples’ astonishment intensified: “Who then can be saved?” (Mark 10:26). If the blessed and resourceful cannot make it, no one can. Jesus agreed—partially: “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God” (Mark 10:27). Human effort cannot achieve entrance into the kingdom. Not for the rich, not for anyone. Salvation requires divine intervention. Only God can transform hearts that cling to possessions, status, and security. The rich man’s only hope—and everyone’s only hope—was for God to do what humans cannot.

Peter’s statement and Jesus’ promise (10:28–30)

Peter spoke for the disciples: “We have left everything to follow you!” (Mark 10:28). Unlike the rich man, they had responded to Jesus’ call. They left nets, boats, tax booths, families. Peter was not boasting but seeking clarification. If the rich man failed the test, had they passed it?

Jesus affirmed their sacrifice with an “Amen” saying—a formula indicating solemn pronouncement: “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” (Mark 10:29–30). The list was comprehensive: home, family relationships, livelihood. Whatever disciples surrendered for Jesus and the gospel would be returned multiplied.

The reward was not individual replacement but community abundance. The hundredfold was not literal—no one needs a hundred mothers—but described the extended family of disciples who share homes, resources, and relationships. Those who leave everything find themselves welcomed into a new household far larger than what they abandoned. The church, at its best, fulfills this promise: brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, homes and provision shared among those united by allegiance to Jesus.

But the list included a jarring addition: “along with persecutions” (Mark 10:30). The rewards were real but not unalloyed. Following Jesus brought both community and conflict. The present age offered multiplication of relationships and resources—mixed with opposition from those who rejected kingdom values. Only “in the age to come” would disciples receive “eternal life” without suffering. The man who walked away missed both the present community and the future inheritance.

The reversal of first and last (10:31)

Jesus concluded with an epigram: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Mark 10:31). The saying summarized everything that had transpired. The rich man appeared first—respected, obedient, eager, wealthy. He ended last, walking away from Jesus. The disciples appeared last—fishermen, tax collectors, nobodies. They would be first, having left everything to follow.

The reversal was not arbitrary but reflected kingdom values. Those who clung to worldly status, security, and possessions found these very things blocking their entrance. Those who held nothing—who received the kingdom as children with empty hands—found the door open. The first became last when they refused to let go. The last became first when they had nothing to let go of in the first place.

Application

1. Keeping commandments is not enough

The rich man had genuinely obeyed God’s commands from childhood. Jesus did not dispute his claim or accuse him of hidden sins. Yet obedience to commandments did not secure eternal life. Something more was required—something the man lacked despite his impeccable moral record. This challenges anyone who measures their standing with God by religious performance. You may have avoided the obvious sins, honored your parents, dealt honestly in business, and maintained a respectable life. None of this is worthless; Jesus looked at this man and loved him. But moral achievement does not equal discipleship. The question is not whether you have kept rules but whether you have followed Jesus—whether your life, possessions, and future belong entirely to him. Respectable goodness falls short of the one thing the kingdom requires.

2. What you cannot release reveals what owns you

Jesus’ demand exposed what the man could not surrender. He could give up sins he never committed; he could not give up wealth he actually possessed. The command to sell everything and follow was not arbitrary cruelty but diagnostic precision. It revealed where

his loyalty actually resided. The same test applies to us—not necessarily regarding money, though often that is exactly the issue. Whatever we cannot imagine releasing for Jesus' sake has become our functional god. It might be financial security, career ambition, family approval, comfort, or reputation. The thing we grip most tightly is the thing most likely blocking our entrance into the kingdom. Jesus does not demand poverty from everyone, but he does demand that nothing compete with allegiance to him. What would make your face fall if Jesus asked you to surrender it?

3. Salvation is humanly impossible

The disciples' question—"Who then can be saved?"—received a startling answer: "With man this is impossible." Jesus did not say salvation was difficult or that it required extraordinary effort. He said it was impossible. No amount of obedience, generosity, or religious devotion can achieve entrance into the kingdom. The rich cannot buy their way in; the moral cannot earn their way in; the religious cannot perform their way in. Salvation requires God to do what humans cannot—to transform hearts that cling to everything except him. This is either terrifying or liberating depending on where you place your confidence. If you trust your own resources, the news is devastating. If you trust God's power to do the impossible, the news is hope. All things are possible with God—including the salvation of people who have nothing to offer but empty hands.

4. Sacrifice for Jesus is never ultimately loss

Peter reminded Jesus that the disciples had left everything. Jesus did not minimize their sacrifice but promised extraordinary return: a hundredfold in the present age, eternal life in the age to come. The return was not individual compensation but community multiplication. Those who leave family for Jesus gain a larger family; those who leave homes gain access to many homes; those who leave security find themselves welcomed into a network of shared resources and relationships. The church exists to fulfill this promise—to be the family, the home, the provision for those who have sacrificed everything to follow Jesus. When the church fails at this, it fails at something central to its identity. Disciples do not lose by following Jesus; they gain far more than they surrendered. But the gain comes through community, and it comes "along with persecutions." The reward is real, but it is not comfortable.

Conclusion

The rich man had everything going for him—obedience, sincerity, eagerness, resources. He lacked one thing: willingness to let go. His possessions owned him more than he owned

them. When Jesus offered him the one thing that mattered—himself—the man chose what he already had.

Jesus did not soften the message. It is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom. It is impossible for anyone to enter by human effort. Only God can do what humans cannot. Only grace can transform hearts that cling to everything except Christ.

But those who release their grip discover something unexpected. Sacrifice becomes gain. Loss becomes multiplication. The last become first. The kingdom belongs to those with empty hands—and empty hands are the only kind that can receive what Jesus offers.

Reflection

1. What would make your face fall if Jesus asked you to surrender it?
2. Are you measuring your standing with God by moral performance or by following Jesus?
3. Do you approach God with empty hands or with a résumé of achievements?
4. What possession, relationship, or security have you been unwilling to release?
5. Have you experienced the hundredfold community Jesus promised to those who sacrifice?
6. Do you trust your own resources or God's power to do the impossible?

Discussion

1. Why did Jesus question the man's use of "good teacher" rather than accepting the compliment?
2. What did Jesus' substitution of "do not defraud" for the tenth commandment reveal about this man?
3. Why did Mark include the detail that Jesus looked at the man and loved him?
4. How does the camel-and-needle image emphasize the impossibility of human effort achieving salvation?
5. What does Jesus' promise of a hundredfold return look like in the life of the church?
6. How does the reversal of first and last summarize everything that happened in this passage?