

Interviews of Jesus #6

Michelangelo Buonarroti is remembered today as one of the most gifted artists in all of human history. Even today, thousands crowd into the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican to see the 9 scenes from the Old Testament covering 1,000 square yards across that ceiling that Michelangelo painstakingly painted during 4 years of almost continuously lying on scaffolding on his back. I remember seeing some of his sculptures in the Louvre with Sandy some time ago. One could just stand for hours looking at the intricacy of detail which this artist had the ability to see and capture.

As was the custom of his day, Michelangelo had many students who would study under him as apprentices, hoping that some of his genius would rub off on them. He had studied as a young 12 year old at the feet of the most popular painter in Florence and later had spent some time with the sculptor, Donatello, so Michelangelo knew the importance of this mentoring process.

On one occasion, one of his best students had spent months working on a sculptor. He was confident that it was the best work that he had ever done, so asked his brilliant master to critique the final product and give him his evaluation. Michelangelo promised that he would stop by that afternoon and take a look at it. This student was so nervous that he couldn't stand to be in the presence of Michelangelo as he examined his work - if he didn't like it, he just didn't feel that he could bear the rejection. So when Michelangelo came to his studio, he pretended that he wasn't there, and hid behind a curtain, listening and observing as best he could.

His gifted instructor spent a great deal of time perusing the statute. He then stepped back and said softly, *this work only lacks one thing*. With those words, Michelangelo left.

It only lacks one thing, the student thought. What is it that my sculpture lacks? For the next several days, he went over and over his work, looking for some imperfection, no matter how minor. It came to the place where he couldn't sleep at night. He just lay awake all night wondering what it might be that his work of art lacked. Finally, he couldn't take it any longer. He had to go to his teacher, confess the fact that he had been hiding in the room, and ask what it was that his sculpture lacked.

It took a great deal of courage, but he approached Michelangelo and spilled his story. When he had finished, the master just smiled and said, *I wasn't being critical of your work at all. The one thing that your work lacks is life. If it had life, it would be perfect.*

The words *it only lacks one thing* can be a great compliment or a sharp criticism depending upon our perception. Most of the time, we have the natural tendency to concentrate on the one thing that is lacking and think negatively about the statement. What is lacking? Why isn't it perfect? But we might also

concentrate on every other thing that is not lacking and think positively about the statement. If only one thing is lacking, there must be many things that are right as well.

In the interview that we plan to look at this morning, Jesus made the statement *one thing you lack - one thing is lacking*. In this statement, there is both great commendation and a stern warning. There is only one thing that is lacking - that implies there are many good things that this rich young man had accomplished. But there was that one thing that was lacking - indicating that something very important had to be added to his life.

Notice our Savior's words as I read this interview from the gospel of Mark.

MK 10:17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

MK 10:18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good--except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.' "

MK 10:20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

MK 10:21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

MK 10:22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

1. Let's look first of all at the many areas of commendation which Jesus gives in this interview - for there are many. In fact, as we combine the 3 accounts found in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Luke along with this account that we just read from Mark, we find that this person had many assets that people in his day valued most highly. And these are assets that we still value highly today. Matthew 19:22 says that he was a young man - so he had his youth. Luke 18:18 calls him a ruler - so he had a position of power. The context of Christ's answers to him in each of these passages indicates that he was a rich man - so he had wealth. Most people don't have youth and power and wealth. If they accumulate wealth at all or achieve any position of power, it usually takes them most of their lives - especially in Christ's day when positions of power were pretty much reserved for the elderly. So they either have youth and relative poverty - or age and power and wealth. This person was a rich young ruler- he had it all - wealth, youth and power. And there are many other assets that would be considered very commendable as well.

*This man was obviously a person of fine, natural temperament. He had been raised to be courteous. He had fine etiquette and manners. He addressed Jesus with the words, *Good teacher*. This is certainly commendable. He was not a rebellious, crass person, but rather was a courteous person.

*He was a very religious man. The word that Luke uses calling him a ruler would probably indicate that he was a leader in his local synagogue. The fact that he was able to achieve such a prestigious position

as a young man shows his dedication and abilities. He must have been very conscientious about his moral conduct and reputation. Certainly, when he says that he has observed all of the commandments from his youth, he is not making an idle statement. He was a very dedicated young man. All of the statements that he makes indicate an orthodoxy of belief. Unlike the Sadducees, he believed in life after death and was concerned that he might possess eternal life. And his religious orthodoxy was not just an intellectual belief, but he believed enough to affect his conduct. When Jesus refers to the commandments, he basically gives the 2nd portion of the Decalogue - do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother - the 5th through the 9th commandments although not in the exact order. And this young man could say with evident honesty that he had observed all of these from his youth. The sincerity of his confession is found in Christ's response. Verse 21 says that *Jesus looked at him and loved him*. Isn't that a tender statement. This was certainly not Christ's response to the Pharisees who told barefaced lies and lived lives filled with hypocrisy. No, the Lord Jesus who could see right into the heart of a person saw sincerity and honesty and a desire for the truth - and that brought the response of love from the heart of Jesus.

*Even though he was a strict religious man, he was also a humble person. How often those who are so rigid in keeping God's commandments are proud of their dedication to the Lord, looking down upon others who are not as diligent as they are. But not this rich young man. When he came into the presence of Jesus, he fell on his knees before him. And in order to catch the full import of this action, we have to remember the cultural norms of the Middle East that dictated that rulers would never greet peasants by kneeling. Peasants, those of a lower class, would always greet rulers by kneeling. It was sign of respect. Jesus was recognized by his community as being a carpenter. He was a peasant, a common laborer. For this young man who was a ruler in his synagogue to fall down on his knees before him shows profound humility - and even courage, for he put himself in a precarious position with regards to his fellow religious leaders.

*This rich young ruler was also a sincerely zealous person. He ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees before him. He answers all of Christ's questions with complete openness, and even his response after his confrontation with Christ shows that he was not hiding anything. I believe this was a major reason for Christ's great concern and love for him. This man was sincerely zealous to find the key to eternal life.

*Nor was he a thoughtless person. He was not one who was so wrapped up and involved in his own religiosity that he never took time to think about the true nature of spirituality. He was not one who pursued his business or pleasure filling up his hours so that there was no time for thought. No, he was a thoughtful man. He had studied the law, and he had tried to keep it to the best of his abilities. He was extremely wealthy, but he had his priorities in order. He was not using his wealth selfishly as many young people in his

shoes would have done. He rather had studied God's word and was trying to keep it to the best of his abilities. And he wanted that which was most important - confidence of eternal life.

*Yes, when Jesus said, *One thing you lack*, there certainly is a word of commendation concealed in those words. This rich young ruler had many, many positive qualities - qualities that would have made him to be one of the most influential and respected members of his community. He was not lacking in so many of the areas where his fellow citizens had failed. He was a fine, cultured person, a religious leader in his community, a humble, sincerely zealous, thoughtful person.

2. But Christ's words *one thing you lack* also brought a word of warning to the mind and heart of the rich young ruler. He was lacking in one area. What could that be? He had been so conscientious in his religious observances. Where did he fall short?

The Lord Jesus summarizes his short-comings in 5 short commands which he gives in verse 21. *Jesus looked at him and loved him. One thing you lack, he said. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*

***Go, sell, give** - then **come, follow** me.

*We most often put the emphasis upon the first set of 3 commands. Go, sell, give. And we have a tendency to jump to the conclusion that the one thing that this rich, young ruler lacked was poverty. If only he would give away all of his riches, then he could be poor enough to inherit eternal life. But a closer examination of the text shows us that this was not really Christ's major point. Jesus' emphasis builds to the second set of 2 commands. *Then **come, follow** me.* The real lack in this young man's life was failure to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as his Messiah and fully surrender his life to Christ in discipleship. The evidence of this lack was found in his clinging to his material possessions as his ultimate security. If he would be willing to completely surrender his life in discipleship to the Lord Jesus Christ, and as evidence of this commitment voluntarily give all of his material possessions away, then he would inherit eternal life.

This is the reason for Christ's strange response to his original salutation. When this rich young man had first approached Christ, he had asked, *Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?* You remember Jesus immediately responded with a rather strange reply. *Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good - except God alone.* Christ's initial reply immediately draws this young man with his keen mind to a logical conclusion. Either Christ is not good or he is God - one or the other. The young man has called him *Good Teacher*. Is he willing to accept him as the Messiah, as the Son of God, as God incarnate in the flesh? If so, the only further correct response would be complete and full surrender of his life to him in discipleship. If he would be willing to do this, then he could inherit eternal life.

You see, the real lack in this young man's life was found in the fact that he had not come after Christ

with a sincere willingness to follow him. And this lack was evidenced by his clinging to his material possessions for security. In short, his wealth was standing in the way of the full commitment that was necessary to his inheriting eternal life.

Now we certainly cannot generalize Christ's statements to this rich young ruler and make them applicable to everybody. On this occasion, Jesus was speaking to the specific needs of this rich, young ruler. The Lord Jesus never intended for his statements to be taken as a universal path to eternal life - giving away of all of one's possessions. Nowhere else in his dealing with people does he make this demand of them. When he talked with Nicodemus, Christ didn't tell him that he had to give away all of his possessions to be born again. When he spoke with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, Jesus didn't command her to return back to her home and give away all of her possessions. And the reason for this is the simple fact that every person has something different that stands in the way of his or her full commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. For some it is pride - they are not willing to come to Christ because of what their friends might think. That might have been Nicodemus' major problem for he came to Jesus under the cloak of darkness at night so that none of his influential friends would see him. For others, it is hedonistic pleasures - they are not willing to give up pleasures that appeal to their fleshly desires. That might have been the Samaritan woman's problem for she had lived a very loose life morally. But for every person, it is something different.

This rich young man was humble - pride was not the issue with him. This rich young man was very disciplined in his lifestyle - hedonistic pleasures were not a hindrance to him. But his vast wealth was - and Christ saw that in his heart. So Jesus does not command him to give up his position as ruler in the synagogue, he does not command him to give up any earthly pleasures - he commands him to give up his riches to the poor - because Christ knew that his wealth was the obstacle standing in his path.

Christ's insight is seen immediately in the response of this rich young ruler. The Bible simply says in verse 22, *At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.* That phrase describing his countenance is most interesting for it is only used one other time in the New Testament. In Matthew 16:3, this word is used to describe a dark, overcast, stormy sky. As this rich young ruler left the presence of Jesus, he left with a dark cloud over his head. He had come to Jesus with great sincerity and optimism. He really had thought that he was willing to follow God with his whole heart. But Jesus had revealed that the secret love of his life was his wealth. And now, he realized he had to face the fact that he was trusting in his vast resources for his security.

We don't know what happened to this rich young man. It is interesting that this is the only time in the gospel accounts where Jesus gave an invitation to someone to follow him and the person refused to immediately comply. But even in his sorrowful reply, we might find some hope. For the Bible says that

Godly sorrow brings repentance unto salvation.

Even though we can't be dogmatic as to what path the rest of this rich young ruler's life took, we can hypothesize that he likely took one of 2 directions. Either he went back to his home of ease and luxury, a home made plush by all of the merchants of Tyre and Damascus, and every time he looked at his vast material wealth he saw eternal damnation staring at him in the face until he could no longer tolerate his material possessions and he was led to give all of those material possessions to the poor and join those who were following the Lord Jesus Christ as his followers or he journeyed back to his home, settled back into his daily routine saying to himself, *I cannot imagine what possessed me to kneel to that peasant and seek his advice.* And then continuing on in his religious, respectable life, he tried to convince himself that he was at least as good as everyone else, better than most - but just lacking one thing. We hope that the former was true, and are encouraged by Christ's statement to his disciples that even though it is *easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, with God all things are possible.* But we don't know for sure. What is sure is his response to the instructions which Christ gave and the subsequent direction that he took in life determined his eternal home.

In the Canadian Rockies there is a stream that is called Divide Creek. It is not an impressive body of water - just a small stream running down out of the mountains. You couldn't even call it a river. But it is unique because in one place the creek divides around a large boulder that sets right in the middle of the water. Every drop of water that runs to the left of that boulder eventually ends up in Kicking Horse River which flows into the Pacific Ocean. Every drop of water that runs to the right of that boulder goes on to flow into the Bow River which eventually joins with the Saskatchewan River, which flows into Lake Winnipeg, draining out into the Nelson River which empties into Hudson Bay and finally into the Atlantic Ocean. In a sense, as the snows melt in the spring atop that Canadian Rocky, each drop of water adopts a path that determines what side of the world will eventually be its home.

When the Lord Jesus Christ said to the rich young ruler, *Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me,* he put that young man right at the point of that boulder in Divide Creek. The decision that this rich young ruler made would eventually determine whether or not he would inherit eternal life, where he would spend all eternity.

We all stand at that boulder in Divide Creek whenever we are presented with the claims of Jesus Christ. Perhaps you are right there this morning? Perhaps you don't have the confidence that you have inherited eternal life? Let me just ask this one question in closing. What is it that stands between you and full surrender to the Lord Jesus Christ? Only you know the answer to that question. If Jesus were standing here this morning, he would ask you to give it up and to follow him. Are you willing to surrender fully to the Lord

Jesus Christ this morning? If you are, you too can inherit eternal life.