

I have to confess that I have always found this to be a challenging Gospel. A cursory reading of it may lead us to assume that the only way to enter heaven is to completely divest ourselves of all our possessions and live a life of asceticism. St. Francis of Assisi chose this radical life style as did other saints, but I don't think that we are all called to this mode of living. If we look more closely at this Gospel I think we can discover guidance for the rest of us.

The first thing we may notice is we are a lot like the man who knelt before Jesus. He believes in God, he follows God's law and he worships God as the law teaches. We too believe in God, we strive to follow his commandments and worship as the Church teaches. The man seeks eternal life which is our goal as well.

In answer to the man's question of how to inherit eternal life Jesus describes the basic requirement – follow the commandments. To this the man responds by professing his life long faith. By carefully considering what happens next, I believe we can find the key to understanding the message this episode has for us.

Jesus uses this opportunity to call the man into a deeper relationship with God and himself. He recognizes that the man has deep attachments to his possessions and that those attachments will impede his entering into that deeper relationship. That is why he tells him to sell his possessions and give to the poor. To take the next step he must first detach himself from his love of worldly things. Unfortunately, the man's attachments are so strong that he rejects Jesus' call.

We are much like this man. We believe in God, follow Christian teachings, worship God in his Church, and I presume we are also attached to many of our possessions. After all, our money and possessions provide us with a sense of security. The big question is: are we so attached to our stuff that we ignore Jesus' call to us?

As I was preparing for this homily, I found an on-line article about this reading. It included a humorous anachronistic image at the beginning of the article. It shows Jesus standing on a road outside of Jerusalem. Next to him is a man standing beside his Ferrari – obviously a man with many worldly possessions to which he is likely attached. This made me think about my own attachments. I don't own anything like a Ferrari, but what I do own is important to me. Again, the question is: am I so attached to the worldly things that are important to me that those attachments impede me from growing in my relationship with Jesus?

There is spiritual danger in being attached to wealth and possessions. Having wealth and possessions in itself is not the problem, it is the attachment to these things that can become a problem. Worldly treasures are nice and can provide a sense of security but it is treasures in heaven that we should strive to obtain. And that requires us to use our wealth and possessions, with which God has blessed us, to lift up our brothers and sisters who are less fortunate we.

In our first reading today the writer says that wealth compared to wisdom is worthless. He values wisdom over riches, gems, gold, silver and even health and beauty. But he also says he values wisdom over scepter and throne. A scepter is a symbol of power and a throne a symbol of prestige. This reading from Wisdom helps us realize, it is not just wealth and possessions to which we can be attached. There are passions like power and prestige to which we can also become attached. These too will harm our spiritual life.

Some people are obsessed with power. Just look at the many brutal dictators around the world. Power gives a person a feeling of security and superiority, but it can also blind the person to the needs of others.

Some people aspire for prestige and popularity to validate their lives. They can become self centered and obsessed with promoting themselves, sometimes using others to achieve their status.

Some people seek pleasure to give their life meaning, often at the expense of others. Unhealthy attachment to pleasure can lead to addictions, exploitations of others, and rejection of a virtuous lifestyle.

All these things: power, pleasure, prestige, popularity and possessions are not bad things if they are used virtuously in the service of our fellowman. It is when they become the focus of our lives that they become spiritually dangerous. There is one underlying virtue that can moderate our desire for these things and keep us focused on God's plan for us – that is the virtue of humility.

A person with power who is humble will use that power to lift up his people and empower them to be successful in their endeavors. Popular people who have the virtue of humility can influence others to follow virtuous and fruitful lives. Pleasure, when pursued virtuously can enhance the lives of those around us. And most of all, our wealth and possessions, when used to help those in need, bring us into the most intimate relationship with Jesus, for what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters we do for him.

Pope Saint Leo the Great addressed these issues in one of his sermons. He said:

*“It cannot be doubted that the poor can more easily attain the blessing of humility than those who are rich. In the case of the poor, the lack of worldly goods is often accompanied by a quiet gentleness, whereas the rich are more prone to arrogance. Nevertheless, many wealthy people are disposed to use their abundance not to swell their own pride but to perform works of benevolence. They consider their greatest gain what they spend to alleviate the distress of others.”*

Humility is a key to maintaining a healthy association with our possessions and our passions. Pride can change that association into attachment, which will inevitably interfere with our relationship with Jesus and our brothers and sisters.

It is also important for us to recognize the common mistake the man made when he addressed Jesus. He asked what must “I” do to inherit eternal life. This is an example of the arrogance of the rich of which Pope Leo spoke. We can do nothing ourselves to inherit eternal life. It would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for us to “earn” our way into heaven. Luckily what is impossible for human beings is not impossible for God. *“All things are possible for God.”*

So, the guidance we can find in this Gospel is to strive to never let attachments to wealth, possessions, power, social status or pleasure to keep us from responding to Jesus’ call to a deeper relationship with him. It is through that relationship we will inherit eternal life.