

When Your Religion Lets You Down

Mark 10:17-31

I'm reading a fascinating new book by Bishop John Shelby Spong. It's called **Eternal Life: A New Vision**. Early in the book Spong tells about how the subject of eternal life became a lifelong concept of study and thought. When he was twelve years old his father died. The death brought profound changes. He lost a parent he loved very deeply and his family lost financial security.

The death of his father also thrust Spong into deep confusion about faith. He had developed a strong commitment to the church and to Christian growth. He was absorbing Biblical passages and theological concepts. Yet what he saw and heard following his father's death seemed contradictory. He was told that his father was in heaven and that he was very happy. The twelve-year-old boy wondered why everyone around him was sad if the event was indeed a happy one. Moreover, he had questions about the pronouncements of the church and what he was able to observe for himself. Regular church attendance was preached as the highest human virtue and the thing that pleased God most. Yet Spong knew that his father did not attend church other than going to services at Easter and Christmas. The Christian, his church said, should shun the major vices such as smoking, drinking, gambling, and swearing. His father was an episodic alcoholic, a two-pack-a-day smoker, a man who played cards with friends for money, and one who was known to use quite profane language on occasion. Was he really in heaven? If not, how could a loving God not accept a generally good and loving man?

Spong learned at a very young age that religion can let you down. Sometimes, for all of us, our religious system is not adequate to help us through one of life's crises. Religion can also let you down when you need a sense of acceptance and oneness with God and with other people. You feel cut off and you don't know why or what to do about it.

Sam Keen, who has written many fine things in the area of spiritual growth, has often described in a helpful way a longing that many of us feel. He tells about aching for a sense of all-rightness about himself. Following his religious beliefs he avoided sin and tried to believe all the right things. He sought to use his God-given talents to the best of his ability. He earned a doctorate from an Ivy League school; he became a noted professor and lecturer. Still he felt what he called “a sense of nobodiness.” He longed just to feel at peace with himself.

I think the young man who came to Jesus must have felt something like that. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story. Mark calls him a “stranger,” but there is enough information here to get a pretty good picture of him. Luke says that he was a “ruler” of some type; all three gospels point out that he was very wealthy. So we have named this man “the rich young ruler.” Mark comments that Jesus’ heart “warmed” to him, indicating that he was a sincere seeker. We can all be grateful for his honesty and his question.

“What must I do to win eternal life?” the young man asked, according to the rendering in the *Revised English Bible*. The RSV has “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” If you note the situation and how the question is presented, you can see that this is not an abstract philosophical approach to a general topic for discussion. The young man “ran” to Jesus and apparently stopped him out of urgent need. The man seemingly had everything, even a sound religious system, but something was lacking in his life. I think that the reason Mark says that Jesus “loved” him or “warmed to him” is that Jesus was touched that the young man could put aside his dignity and openly raise a question that many others probably wanted to ask.

Before anyone can have a spiritual breakthrough he or she must come to see the insufficiency of a generalized and shallow religion. You have to let something go in order to move to another level. When I trace my personal faith development, I can isolate perhaps a half dozen places where I made a major

faith step. Each time I had to leave a belief or system that up to then had given me grounding and comfort. Growth occurs that way. As Paul said, “When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (I Cor. 13:11). We accept that principle in the physical, the emotional, and the social parts of life. We need also to accept it in the spiritual.

Jesus helped the young man recognize the weaknesses in the religious approach that he had followed. In effect he asked, “Don’t you find keeping the commandments enough?” The response came quickly and decisively, “Teacher, I have kept these since I was a boy.” You can sense the tone of desperation. Keeping the commandments for him was not enough. His religion did not meet spiritual needs. He was ready to move to another level.

So Jesus gave him the key. “One thing you lack,” Jesus said. “Go, sell everything you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven: then come and follow me.” Now, be honest! Don’t we just let the story drop at this point? Nobody that I know is going to do this. We don’t take this seriously and miss something very precious. Even Jesus’ disciples were stunned. They didn’t even have wealth, but at length one of them said, “If that’s what’s necessary, who then can be saved?”

Give attention to a couple of things. One is the way Jesus tried to direct the young man from the future to the present. The young man wanted to “win,” “inherit,” or “gain” eternal life. His approach to spirituality was the same as his approach to everything else. He wanted to earn it or buy it. Jesus wanted him to discover the kingdom of God in the present. He could do that only by relinquishing the ties that his wealth had on him.

I’m not convinced that Jesus intended for the young man to divest himself of all his money. I think his comment was an exaggeration. Just earlier in the narrative Jesus had said that if one’s hand or foot leads to sin, he should cut it off, or if an eye leads to sin, he should pluck it out. Only the most naïve literalist

would fail to see that Jesus was exaggerating the situation in order to make a point. Possibly, he was doing that here as well. If this is a demand for discipleship, we have all fallen short. However, we must heed the message: If something such as wealth hinders our spiritual quest, we are better off without it.

Jesus told the young man to live in the present and to surrender whatever impeded his search for peace and fulfillment. Second, Jesus pointed to the inward pathway. Commandments are easy to keep. If you find them difficult, you find a way around them. That's what the Jewish religious system did. And that's why Jesus got into so much trouble. The law said that one should not kill, and Jesus said that that's not enough, that you should show respect for all persons and even love your enemy.

"Come, follow me" was the call. And how does one follow Jesus? By affirming beliefs about Jesus? By quoting Jesus' words? No! We "follow" Jesus by seeking to do what he did, by listening to and heeding the call of God deep within our hearts.

The "rich young ruler" didn't stay to explore Jesus' way. But his question rattled the disciples. They wanted to talk about it. You can do this, Jesus assured them, with God's help. "All things are possible with God." And what about rewards? A hundred times as much of everything! When you make this journey inward, you have all you need.

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