

Our hearts laid bare

By [Paul J. Wadell](#)

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This week's epistle reading [ends](#) by exhorting us to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." That's exactly what the young man in the Gospel story does: he boldly approaches the throne of grace that is Jesus, in search of everlasting life. But when Jesus speaks to him the word of mercy and grace that he truly needs, he cannot bear it. As much as he hungers for life, he's not yet willing to sell all that he has for the sake of the kingdom of God. Consequently, he walks away not filled with the life he was seeking but grieving what he's leaving behind.

Would Jesus give the same response to any one of us in search of everlasting life? Would his counsel always be to "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor"? For those of us deeply enmeshed in a culture of consumerism, this would not be surprising. Our society relentlessly tells us to measure who we are by what we own: the more we have, the more we are. Selling what we own means not only that we have less, but also that we *become* less. So it's easy to see ourselves in this story.

But many things can block our participation in the reign of God. It would be "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle" than for some of us to forgive those who have harmed us. Well-nurtured anger and bitterness can settle into our hearts for so long that we cannot imagine ourselves without them, even for the sake of life with God. Pride, jealousy or envy prevent some of us from knowing the life God wants to share with us; for others it's excessive ambition, relentless self-promotion or an obsession with success.

Once we picture ourselves asking Jesus what we must do "to inherit eternal life," it is easy to imagine Jesus crafting his response to what we uniquely need. The path to everlasting life for any of us will depend on what Jesus finds in the depths of our hearts. If he gazed into our hearts, what would he—and we—discover? In exposing the young man's innermost spirit, Jesus reveals the man to himself in a startling but

redemptive way. He sees him as he truly is, but not as the young man is yet able to see himself. This is why Jesus' word of mercy and grace to the rich young man is also the "two-edged sword" that unmask "the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Before God "no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare"—exactly what happens to the young man.

Like the young man, we can cling to things that make it impossible for us to know everlasting life. After the young man walks away crestfallen, Jesus [comments](#) on the staggering difficulty of anyone entering the kingdom of God. It's clear, however, that the difficulty comes not from Jesus but from ourselves. The young man keeps himself out of the kingdom of God because he cannot imagine a devotion to God that would transcend his devotion to decidedly inferior goods. Thus, when Jesus [concludes](#) his remarks to the bewildered disciples with one of his most recognizable sayings—"But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first"—we cannot help but wonder if we put ourselves last on account of our unwillingness to heed whatever word of mercy and grace is most suitably our own.

*Additional lectionary columns by Wadell appear in the October 6 issue of the Century—click [here](#) to subscribe.*