

October 14, Ordinary 28B (Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16)

What if Jesus is talking about humility rather than possessions?

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [September 26, 2018](#) issue

A young man throws himself at Jesus' feet, asking for spiritual direction. He already does all the usual religious stuff, but he wants something more. So Jesus gives him a challenge: to sell all he has, give the money to the poor, *then come, follow me*. But this is not the kind of spiritual extreme sport that the young man was hoping for. Like so many Christians who have heard these words over the centuries, when the young man hears Jesus' invitation, he walks away, shocked and dejected, because "he had many possessions."

Nowadays, we have so many possessions that selling them off would be a full-time job, if we could even find buyers. Most of them are disposable or cheap. Folks would rather buy a new thing from Target than a used thing from someone else. More often, we fill garbage bags to rid ourselves of possessions, dropping them in the trash or at Goodwill (which then throws a lot of them away), perhaps while reading books or blogs about the joys of decluttering. So our landfills and oceans receive our clutter, weighing down soils, waters, and our fellow creatures with our former abundance. Disposing of our possessions is not as pure or effective a spiritual practice as it used to be.

But what if this passage is about humility, not possessions? Like the rich young man, I have hungered for spiritual rigor. Looking for a challenge, over the years I have selected and abandoned spiritual directors like so many Target throw pillows. None ever suggested I consider selling all my possessions, but maybe I wanted them to. I wanted to be told to work at something, like fasting or memorizing psalms. I wanted the word of God, living and active, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, to pierce my life like a two-edged sword. Instead, usually I've been given a cup of tea and asked questions like: *How are you? What is your image of God? What is your deepest desire?*

People who came to Jesus didn't find a spiritual drill sergeant, either. Being one of his disciples was less about spiritual rigor and more about love: getting along with one another, serving the sick and oppressed, and . . . gulp, leaving behind your home and your possessions to follow him. The rich young man asks Jesus for spiritual rigor, and Jesus in turn asks him to give up the life he knows and to live for others. Spiritual rigor is not about the self, in the end, but about the stranger.

"The last shall be first and the first shall be last," Jesus explains to his disciples. Inheriting eternal life in Christ is not about checking off boxes, not even the boxes of the commandments. It is not about achieving extreme-sport levels of prayer or atmospheric levels of spiritual wisdom. Whatever we think eternal life means, perhaps its first lesson is that we cannot earn or create it ourselves. Perhaps the eternal life that Jesus offers means emptying ourselves and our lives rather than accomplishing anything.

A few years ago, in crisis, I went to a local Christian spiritual center and was assigned a spiritual director who was an elderly Catholic sister. She listened to my story, and she told me two simple things. First, that God is love. Second, pointing her finger at me with firmness and affection, she said: "Remember, you are poor." She explained: you do not have the resources to save yourself, fix your problems, or change the world—only God does. Perhaps she saw my temptation to believe in my own ability and responsibility for my life, in no small part because of my many possessions: great education, successful work life, health insurance, retirement savings, and a house full of stuff. I am tempted to believe that, based on my own efforts and knowledge, I can achieve—am supposed to achieve—a spiritual life, a godly life, eternal life.

The rich today include many more of us than in Jesus' time, used to trusting in our own wits, work, and will to get things done and bend our world to our control. It is hard for us to find the kingdom of heaven, to enter into it, to see the value of eternal life—as hard as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Scholars have tried to argue this metaphor into something less impossible ("the needle's eye" was a gate, a "camel" a kind of rope). I'm not sure why, since Jesus provides the antidote in the very next verse: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." We cannot save ourselves, but God can. As Jesus makes clear to the young man looking for his extra credit assignment, the way to eternal life is not achievement but want and surrender. It is to claim the words *I am poor*.

Jesus' final words to the young man are "Then come, follow me." What gets in the way of my following Christ? This is the rigor I was longing for—not a spiritual drill sergeant, but a person able to see me and tell me the truth: that whatever possessions I grip most tightly are the junk that is most in my way. That I am poor; that my only wealth and security is Christ. That Jesus, in whom all things are possible, is always saying, "Now, come, follow me." And maybe even, "What is your deepest desire?"