

Matthew 19:16-26--Following Where God Leads

Introduction: Good morning everyone, and Happy New Year! My name is Mark, and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church; it's great to have you with us. I couldn't bring myself to take down the Christmas decorations yet...they are so beautiful and they bring such clarity and focus to our worship. The arrival of Jesus speaks of the goodness of God and the depth of His love for us.

Because of God's great love for us, He sent His Son to become human, to become one of us, so that through Jesus we might be saved. This morning, I pray that these two realities will burn within our hearts: that God is good, and that He loves us with a furious love. We were created for God, to be in deep relationship with Him, and we will never be satisfied with anything less...neither will He.

This morning we're going to turn our attention to a Biblical text found in Matthew 19:16-26 (page 1529); I've entitled the message this morning: *Following Where God Leads*. And as you are turning to Matthew 19, I want to invite you to listen to a story that a couple from our congregation sent to me last week...it's something they came across in their own reading.

Illus: A professing Christian dreamt he was driving in the back woods and came across an old country store. He stopped in and looked around, and there he saw the most beautiful pearl he had ever seen. The man said, "I would give anything to own that treasure. I would give all that I have." The store owner replied, "Are you sure you know what you are offering?" The man answered, "Yes, I am." The owner said, "Fine. It is a deal."

The man emptied his pockets and wallet and came up with a little over \$200. He said "that is all that I have." The store owner took the money and put it into the cash register and started to wrap the pearl. The man then asked, "Could you lend me \$5.00 for gas for my car?" The store owner replied, "Oh, you have a car. I will take the title and the keys." The man protested "But I need my car to get to my job." "Oh" said the store owner, "you have a job? Here is my address for your employer to send me your wages."

The man pleaded, "I need these wages to pay for the mortgage on my house." "Oh, you have a house? I will take the keys and the deed." The man cried "I need the house for my family to live in." The store owner said "I see...I'm getting a family in this deal". The poor man was stunned.

The store owner smiled returned the car keys and said, "I am loaning you my car, but you must remember it is mine. I have some friends who sometimes need a ride to church, I will expect you to use my car to help them." He gave him back the deed and house keys and said, "You may use my house. I have friends all over the world and sometimes they need a place to stay. I am sure you will not mind letting them use a few rooms in my house.

I also have enterprises all over the world that need bright, young people to work for me. I may need one or more of my new children

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that I will entrust in your care, to go to Africa or India, to work for me." The man woke up and realized the message of the dream.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "You are not your own. You are bought with a price," what he meant was that all that we are and have belongs to Jesus.¹

Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart, or the casually committed. Ruth Haley Barton writes, "Many of us want a 'spiritual journey' because that sounds cool but we don't want a faith journey-- a journey that requires us to risk anything or to move beyond the (mostly) comfortable existence we have carved for ourselves."

She continues, "The truth is that there is no real spiritual journey that does not at some point require some sort of bungee-jumping of the soul, some sort of radical letting go of what we are holding onto."²

God is good and He invites us into an all consuming experience of His love. And His love is so rich, so full, so deep, that it is always seeking to burn away any rival gods, or attachments, or visible supports that will inevitably fail us.

This morning as I read Matthew 19:16-26, may the Holy Spirit cause the Word of God to burn in our ears, our minds and our hearts. **Read.**

16 Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" 17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments." 18 "Which ones?" he inquired. Jesus replied, "'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" 26 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Perhaps you are familiar with the encounter I've just read for you. Likely, the editors that put your Bible together have inserted a subtitle just before this encounter that reads "*The Rich Young Man,*"

¹ John Reisinger, *Studies in Galatians*.

² Ruth Haley Barton, *Praying With A Backup Plan*, 1.

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or “*The Rich Young Ruler*”. It’s meant to be helpful but unfortunately, subtitles can some time have the opposite effect. When a subtitle gives us the answer (in our case, it tells us that this story is about a rich young ruler), we tend to miss all that we might otherwise glean from the passage.

From the start, many of us conclude that this story has nothing to say about our own lives since none of us are young, rich, rulers. Gary Haugen suggests that a more apt subtitle might be “*The Earnest Young Man*”.

What we have in this encounter is the intense inward struggle of a man who is eager to follow God, but at the critical moment, he struggles to say “yes” to Jesus. How many of us have found ourselves in the same position? How often are we eager to follow, but at the critical moment, when we are required to risk, to sacrifice, to let go of what keeps us comfortable, we struggle to say “yes” to Jesus?

Sometimes we like to think that leading is difficult, but following is easy; that is simply not the case. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. Choosing to follow Him will test our commitments and reveal our attachments, but, the promise is that following Jesus will lead us to life. And in the time remaining, I would like to engage this Biblical text to see what it has to say about God, us, and the journey of faith. So first,

1. *Following Jesus will test our commitments.*

The young man came to Jesus asking what good thing he must do to gain eternal life. And Jesus gave Him a standard response: if you

want to follow God, then begin by obeying those things that God has already laid out for you in His Word. Jesus then gave the man a list of commands that can be found in the second half of the 10 Commandments: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, etc.

But the young man wasn’t satisfied with Jesus’ answer. *All of these I have kept*, he answered, *there’s got to be something else...what do I still lack?* Not only was this young man earnest, he was also persistent and wise.

There is so much more to following Jesus than obeying a list of commands. Don’t get me wrong, there are commands to follow, but no lists of commands can ever capture what it is that God is after; God is after our heart, He’s after our affection, our devotion.

There was a nagging disquiet in this young man’s soul; he knew there was something missing, he knew that something more was required but he didn’t know what. Surely Jesus, a truly wise teacher, would be able to give him an answer and point him in the right direction.

The first answer Jesus gave him pointed to externals, a series of commands to be followed, but Jesus’ answer left him wanting more. And so Jesus gave him a second answer led the young man on an inward journey, forcing him to wrestle with his fundamental commitment to discipleship.

A ‘spiritual journey’ may sound cool, but what happens when we find out that a maturing faith requires significant risk? *Did he really want to become a disciple, or did he just like the sound of it?*

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Illus: It's been 20 years since I was in high school, but some things are etched in my mind (yes that's a picture of me when I graduated). Calculus may be a distant memory, but I can still recall every sub-category of people who walked through the halls of Guildford Park Senior Secondary.

There were the geniuses, the rockers, the jocks, the preps, the skaters...and the list goes on. By the time I was 13 or 14, the skater category was growing in leaps and bounds. They had different hair, clothes, and they even had their own lingo...all of it set them apart from the rest of us. And they were always skating...before school, after school, at lunch...the only time they were separated from their boards was when they were in class.

But there was another category of people that grew up along side the skaters; we called them the "posers". From a distance, they were nearly indistinguishable. They rocked the same hairdos, sported the same custom Vans on their feet, and they talked the talk...trucks, ollies, decks...they were always talking. But it didn't take long to pick out the posers...they may have had a board in their hands but they never got around to really skating.

Sure, they stood on their boards and cruised a round a little; they even threw in an ollie or two, but they never fully committed. Their decks never got beat up, their clothes were never ripped, their knees never got bloody, they never broke any bones. They looked the part, but their fear kept them going all in.

When Jesus tested the young man's commitment, it became clear that he was unwilling to move "all in," unwilling to become uncomfortable in the pursuit of God, unwilling to follow where God was leading. If we're going to follow Jesus, one thing is certain: our commitments will be tested.

2. Second, *Following Jesus will reveal our attachments.*

This earnest young man had been following God but he sensed that something was missing, that there was something more, something deeper, and he was right. The young man came to Jesus, as a student approaches a teacher; he was looking for answers that would help him ascend to new spiritual heights. He'd already been keeping the commands; he thought was ready for the next step in his spiritual journey. But he was wrong...dead wrong.

As Jesus interacted with this young man, God the Father gave Jesus divine insight. The next step in this man's spiritual journey would require a journey inward. While this young man's passion for God was real, he had an attachment to money that was holding him back. There were two rival loves battling deep within him: the love of God, and the love of money.

He came looking for a Teacher but found a Master instead. *Sell everything*, Jesus told him, *and then come follow me.*³ This wasn't the answer he was looking for. Jesus is so often like a flashlight; He exposes what is lurking in our shadows. Nothing is hidden from Him, and the closer we come to Him, the more we are revealed.

³ Matthew 19:21.

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What is interesting is that this young man did not dispute the diagnosis of Jesus; he knew it was true the moment Jesus spoke the words. But how could he give up something so precious to him?

Money had defined his life; who would he be without his money? And how would he live? If he gave it up, he would have to depend on God for things he'd always taken for granted: food, clothes, a place to sleep. Jesus had answered his question, but he couldn't bear the solution He offered. And so, we're told, the earnest young man walked away saddened.

Barton writes, "now the real point of the story becomes clear--it's possible to be earnest and yet afraid. It's possible to be very devout, adoring, and respectful and yet unwilling to trust Jesus with your life."⁴

You see the thing is, choosing to follow Jesus is not a one time decision; He's constantly leading us. And there are times when He leads us on an inward journey, putting His finger on those attachments we didn't even know were hindering us.

Illus: A few weeks ago, Naomi was out with her home group and I was looking forward to putting the kids to bed and spending some unhindered time with the Lord. By 8:15 p.m., I was sitting on the couch with my Bible and my journal. By 8:30 p.m., I could barely keep my eyes open; by 8:45 p.m., I was in bed.

I'm never in bed by 8:45 p.m., and I was so looking forward to spending time with the Lord. As I went upstairs, I said to the Lord:

Are you making me weary because you want to speak to me as I sleep? All night long I dreamt, but one dream in particular stayed with me until the morning. When I woke up, I asked the Lord if there was something in this dream He wanted me to understand. There was...but first let me tell you about my dream.

I was in a ballroom, with beautiful chandeliers, and decorations extending throughout the room. It was a formal affair, that much was evident by the way people were dressed. And I was standing in the middle of the ballroom with an old family friend at my side. I had known this friend since I was 12 or 13, she and I went to Bible school together, I was the emcee at her wedding, her husband and I were on staff together at my former church.

So there we were standing together, and out of the blue, Kristy turned to me and said: *Mark, let's dance together.* Now here's the thing: I don't dance...I never have. I didn't grow up dancing, I never went to a high school dance, the first time I danced was at my grad banquet and I'm not sure you could call what I did "dancing." It's not that I'm against dancing...I'm just against me dancing.

And so when Kristy asked me to dance, I pointed to someone seated nearby and said, *Why don't you ask that guy to dance?* When she said "no" I pointed to another guy, and then another; one by one she said "no" to each person I suggested. *Mark I don't want to dance with any of those people, I want **you** to dance with me.*

Well, finally she got the hint and left me alone. And as I stood there alone, in the middle of the ballroom, I began to rehearse to myself

⁴ Barton, 4.

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things I have said many times while awake: *I don't like dancing, it makes me feel uncomfortable. I don't how to dance, I don't know the steps, I don't know what to do. Dancing makes me feel so self-conscious, like everyone is staring at me...dancing makes me feel so uncomfortable.* And then I woke up.

In the morning, I woke up and this dream was etched on my mind and I began to pray, asking Jesus if there was anything He wanted to make clear from this dream. And like a flood, Jesus filled my mind with the following thoughts: *Mark, where I am about to lead you is going to feel to you a lot like dancing: you won't know what to do, and you won't know all the steps...you're going to feel uncomfortable.*

That got my attention. And as I pressed in further, I began to think about how much I like to plan, to be in control, to have all the answers. I began to think about the high value I place on my “dignity;” I don't like to be unprepared or to look foolish. And all the while I sensed the Lord was asking: *will you trust Me and follow where I lead?*

I'm not so different from this earnest young man...are you? All of us have attachments...things we trust instead of God. Many of us are earnest, but equally nervous...nervous about trusting God with the big things in our lives: our kids, our marriages, our jobs, our insecurities, our future. Every so often, Jesus brings us up to the boundary of our fears and invites us to take His hand and cross over. When He draws that line in the sand, what will we do? Will we trust Him, or will we turn sadly and walk away?

This earnest young man was not as ready as he thought. He was not ready to let go of his attachments and trust himself completely to God. He walked away from so much more than a learning opportunity; this young man walked away from life as God intended it. And that leads us to the final idea:

3. *Following Jesus always leads to life.*

Jesus is the Master Builder, and when He gets to work on us, in us, around us, the fruit of His work is always life. The difficult bit is that when He first begins to build, it doesn't often feel like life...instead, it feels like dismantling, destruction, and death is at work.

Illus: When Naomi and I were in Calgary, we had a home built for us, complete with unfinished basement; the plan was to put a little sweat equity into our house and finish the basement on our own. And so I would be down in the basement working, building, but I was all zeal and no knowledge. I put up some walls, threw up some drywall, and the place started to come together. I was quite proud of my efforts...until my dad came.

Dad was kind but let's just say that my building didn't pass inspection. Before long, drywall was coming down, walls were being dismantled and rebuilt...it was all quite humbling. When the Master Builder appears, things are seldom left the way they were. In the long run, it is nearly always better to tear down and rebuild than it is to try and make something work that is unworkable.

Jesus is doing more than leading us to heaven...He is making our lives fit for the life of heaven. He is teaching us things like humility, submission, and worship because He wants us to enjoy eternity, not

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endure it. And so, Jesus is at work, through the Spirit, to remove anything that hinders us from receiving, enjoying, and living in the love and life of God.

Some of us have built our lives on shaky foundations. We claim Jesus as our foundation when in actual fact it might be our job, our friends, or some bit of prestige or notoriety we have achieved that fills us with a sense of purpose, meaning, and security.

Or, our attachments can be so much more subtle. It could be that we have built our lives upon deeply-held emotional patterns that keep us feeling secure and in control of our world. Barton suggests that it could be patterns of denial, avoidance, leaving when the going gets tough, a need to be in control, hiding and withholding ourselves from others, or using anger to intimidate...all of these hinder the life God wants for us...they hinder our experience of His life.

Bob Dylan once sang, “you gotta serve somebody.” Jesus was offering this earnest young man a new lease on life, a life free from slavery to money...a life free to serve and follow God. Jesus offers us the same choice. The only questions is: *who or what will we serve? Do we want to be free from what enslaves us? Free to follow Jesus? Free to enter into life with God?*

There is no real spiritual journey that does not at some point require a radical letting go of what we are holding onto. Left to ourselves, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible. None of us enter into the life of God on the basis of our own worthiness; all of us enter on the basis of what Jesus has done on our behalf. The life God offers was bought with the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross.

We enter into His life because of grace, and we continue to grow and experience new measures of this kingdom life because of His grace. Not only can Jesus diagnose the attachments of our hearts, He can deal with them, remove them, and rebuild our lives upon a Rock that cannot be moved.

Matthew 19 tells a story that could easily mine or yours, the story of a person who is earnest but afraid. It reminds us that it is possible to be very devout, adoring, and respectful and yet unwilling to trust Jesus with our lives.

As we begin this New Year, let's start by saying “yes” to Jesus: “yes” to where He wants to lead, “yes” to what He is pointing out in our lives, “yes” because He can be trusted, “yes” because He loves us, and “yes” because He only ever leads us to life.