

Fullness of life: Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

People who are satisfied and content do not seek Jesus—only those who know there is something missing from their lives.

by [Paul J. Wadell](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

Sometimes we are most afraid of what we most need. It's one of the more perplexing mysteries of the human heart. Happiness, peace, healing and all the other elements of fullness of life can be right in front of us, but instead of embracing them, we back away in fear. We know what we need to do to have more blessed and satisfying lives, but in the face of something immensely promising, we are too often like the young man in our Gospel story from Mark: we walk away sad. As a result, we exclude ourselves from the life we not only could have, but that God surely wants for us. The unsettling upshot from this Gospel passage is that, yes, it may indeed be hard to enter the kingdom of God, but the source of difficulty comes not from Jesus, but from us.

The story of the rich young man begins promisingly. He's obviously searching for something; otherwise, why would he go to Jesus? People who are satisfied and content do not seek Jesus, but only those who know there is something missing from their lives. Mark tells us that the young man not only approaches Jesus, but runs to him. He knows Jesus has something to offer him and seems eminently poised to take it. Moreover, he is at a decided advantage because he knows what he really wants and needs. In asking Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" he admits that he needs something more than what he already has in his life—he wants and needs to share as completely as possible in the life of God.

Jesus' initial response to the young man's inquiry is hardly surprising. He tells him that if he is seeking the path to life, the surest way to begin is by keeping the commandments. Yet the fact that the young man can honestly say to Jesus, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth" suggests that obeying the commandments may put us on the path to everlasting life, but is not enough to give

it to us. The young man has lived a good and upright life, but has not yet entered the kingdom of God where everlasting life is found. Keeping the commandments has brought him to the threshold of the reign of God, but in order to cross that threshold he must do one more thing: Jesus tells him he will find what his heart most desires if he sells everything he has and gives the money to the poor.

The young man—along with anyone who hears this story—is stunned. Jesus says he will know fullness of life only by doing something that seems utterly reckless and wildly preposterous. He will find happiness in being stripped of his possessions. He will move more deeply into life with God by letting go—by forever loosening his hold on what he owns. But he cannot yet let go, so instead of accepting Jesus' invitation, he "went away grieving." The comment is telling because it suggests that the young man, after hearing Jesus' advice, doesn't weigh his options and then decide that returning to his wealth and possessions is the better choice. Indeed, there is absolutely no indication that he has found what he's looking for in his wealth, for if he had he would not have come to Jesus in the first place. He knows what Jesus says is true. He knows he is turning his back on the thing he most wants and needs. Fullness of life is standing right before him, but he can't let go of a lesser good for the sake of a much greater good. Consequently, for the time being his life will continue to be less than it could be.

Perhaps we move to the heart of this Gospel story when we recall that just before Jesus deflated the young man with his shocking suggestion, Mark records that "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Love is a way of seeing, and those who love us best see us best. In loving the young man, Jesus sees him as he truly is, but in a way that the young man is not yet capable of seeing himself. Jesus wants him to have the life he is looking for, but lets him know that his attachment to what he owns prevents him from seeing and being who he truly is, and thus from finding fullness of life. In this respect, there is an uncanny connection between the Gospel story and the passage from Hebrews. We can even say that in this story Jesus performs, or enacts, the passage from Hebrews because like "the word of God" that is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," Jesus' response penetrates to the very heart of the rich young man. Jesus exposes his innermost spirit, reveals what is hidden and shows the young man to himself in a way that he has never known himself before.

The young man may go away grieving, but he does not go away empty-handed. He finds what he is looking for—knowledge that leads to eternal life—and although he

walks away sad, he does not walk away without hope. Who knows what may happen after he spends a few days at home mulling over what Jesus has said? After all, as Jesus tells his astonished disciples, “For God all things are possible.” The Jesus who looked lovingly at the young man awaits his return.