

One Thing

So we've come down the mountain with Jesus and the inner circle, James, John, and Peter. The three disciples must still be stunned by what just happened, but there is no time to stare off in dazed wonder. Immediately they are back in the fray; Jesus is in high demand. A man begs Jesus to heal his son after the other disciples could not. And then the entire group is back on their way. Jesus tells them for a second time that his suffering, death, and resurrection lie ahead, just down the road. In response, they bicker amongst themselves about which one of them deserves the title of best disciple. Jesus exhibits tremendous patience and tries to teach them what it is to be an agent in this kingdom-come-near. He draws a child in the midst of them and says if they want to welcome him and moreover welcome God, they must welcome children, powerless unnamed children. He tells them that greatness is found in welcoming and in serving and that winning means being last. He then warns the disciples not to do anything to inhibit the faith of little ones and spars with Pharisees about the danger of throwing away relationships. [Read Mark 10:13-31]

He has it all, or so it would seem. He would be quick to tell you that he is wealthy and that he is faithful. He has checked everything off the list. And yet, he here is on his knees in front of Jesus. While we can see his outward posture, we do not know what truly motivates him. His calling Jesus "good teacher," could be a sign of respect. It could also be a way of ingratiating himself with this one who draws crowds around him everywhere he goes. The same could be said about the kneeling. He could genuinely be in awe of Jesus, or he could see Jesus as a way to get the one thing he sees missing from his long list of accomplishments and acquisitions. We cannot know exactly where he is coming from. What

we do know is what he asks: “What must I do to obtain eternal life?” Jesus lists a few of the commandments and adds one:

You know the commandments: *Don't commit murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't give false testimony. Don't cheat. Honor your father and mother.*¹

The “don't cheat,” piece is not in the original Ten Commandments; the others that Jesus lists are largely about how one should function in community. Then Jesus looks at the man and loves him. This is the only place in Mark's gospel where we are told that Jesus loves someone. Elsewhere, we can rightly infer that he loves the disciples, the little children, and yes, that Jesus does in fact love you and me, but this is the only place where Mark names this love explicitly. And with that look of love, he tells the man that he lacks one thing. I can picture the man pulling a notebook out of his pocket and waiting eagerly for Jesus' answer. He is unaccustomed to lacking anything, after all. If he lacks any one thing he can just go get it, right. Money is no object. He has the means and the ability to go and get whatever that thing might be. “Just name it, Jesus. I'm on it. No problem.” But that's the thing. It's not simply something he can go get and check off his list. The one thing is not a matter of acquiring another possession or simply checking another item of a list. It is so much more, because eternal life is not earned or acquired or amassed or bought, but it is shared.

Dan Price is the CEO of a payment processing company named Gravity which he founded in his teens. At the age of 31, he was earning over one million dollars a year and living a tech mogul's dream life. He owned multiple homes and routinely drank champagne when dining at fancy restaurants. While hiking one day with his friend, Valerie, he was stunned and angry to learn that even though she earned around \$40,000 a year, Valerie was floundering:

¹ Mark 10: 19, CEB

As they walked, she told him that her life was in chaos, that her landlord had [raised] her monthly rent...by \$200 and she was struggling to pay her bills. It made Price angry. Valerie...had served for 11 years in the military, doing two tours in Iraq, and was now working 50 hours a week in two jobs to make ends meet.²

He realized that he could not change Valerie's situation necessarily, but he could make a difference in the lives of his own employees, many of whom earned about what Valerie did.

He made Valerie and himself a promise:

He would significantly raise the minimum salary at Gravity. After crunching the numbers, he arrived at the figure of \$70,000. He realized that he would not only have to slash his salary, but also mortgage his two houses and give up his stocks and savings. [And he posted his home on Air B&B.]³

Not everyone celebrated Price's decision. Stockholders worried about how their investments would fare. Some loudly and publicly derided him as a communist:

Two senior Gravity employees also resigned in protest. They weren't happy that the salaries of junior staff had jumped overnight, and argued that it would make them lazy, and the company uncompetitive.⁴

Price was raised Christian. He had always been compassionate and polite. His conversation with his friend opened his eyes and his heart to a reality he had not imagined before.

Interestingly, Gravity is now thriving, more than doubling its profits and its customer base in five years. But what is more astonishing is how Price measures that success. He celebrates employees who are now healthier, paying off their own debts, spending more time with their

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-51332811>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-51332811>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-51332811>

families, and saving for retirement. But one metric seems to make Price happier than any other:

‘Before the \$70,000 minimum wage, we were having between zero and two babies born per year amongst the team,’ he says. ‘And since the announcement—and it's been only about four-and-a-half years—we've had more than 40 babies.’⁵

Babies, families, friends are thriving, and Dan Price gets to be a part of that in a way he never was before.

Jesus looks at the young man kneeling before him and sees one thing lacking. The man asks how he might gain eternal life for himself, but Jesus insists that eternal life is not about one individual's golden ticket to the pearly gates. It is about so much more. “You lack one thing,” Jesus tells him. “Sell what you own and give the money to the poor and follow me,” he says. The man goes away sad. And Jesus turns to the disciples.

Jesus makes it clear that it is not easy—impossible even—for the rich to get into the kingdom. Then he invokes that camel and that needle. In the Middle Ages a quaint story about a gate in Jerusalem came about. This gate was said to be narrow, so narrow in fact that a camel had to shed its load to get through. It is a compelling image, but no such gate existed, not in Jesus' time anyway, nor in Mark's. Jesus' point is that there is no end run; there is no way for the camel to make it through that needle. His point is that it is impossible. The rich cannot buy their way in. No one can.

And Peter is flabbergasted, along with the other disciples. “What about us?” Peter asks. “We have left everything!” And Jesus assures him that their sacrifice matters:

‘Anyone who has left house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or farms because of me and because of the good news will receive one hundred times as much

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/stories-51332811>

now in this life—houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms (with harassment)—and in the coming age, eternal life.’⁶

The kingdom is not about pearly gates or the sweet bye and bye. It is more, far more than anything Peter or the disciples or we have imagined on our own. Yes, we are asked to loosen our grip on all that we can earn or produce, to shed the ways we define ourselves and others. We are called to follow not our own whims or wants but the one who looks at us with unconditional love. In him we are asked to welcome and to allow ourselves to be welcomed into a kingdom that includes brothers, sisters, babies, aunts, uncles, grandparents, a host, and a table. This feast invites us to imagine the kingdom, to picture the life God in Christ has in mind, both here and in the life to come.

Some want to argue that this encounter with the young man is not really about money, that money is a metaphor, that God can even squeeze Warren Buffett in. Of course God can. But it is not NOT about money. Wealth and privilege trick us into thinking we define our destiny, that we can save ourselves. Wealth and privilege also tempt us to believe that we are better off flying solo and walling ourselves off from others, that we are safer at a good distance, or that giving at the office is enough.

This table tells us that these assumptions are just not true. At this table, everyone is welcome. At this table everyone receives what she needs, not because she has done a thing to earn it or deserve it, but because in Jesus Christ, grace is a free gift. And that gift of grace shapes us not for a solo journey where it’s every person for themselves; rather that grace shapes us to be in community with one another across every divide the world can throw at us. In the kingdom of God, we notice who is missing, we seek out the lost, we stand by those who weep, we comfort those who are hurting, we speak up for the oppressed, we work to make it

⁶ Mark 10:29-30, CEB

right—whatever *it* may be, and we loosen our grip on our money, our status, and our privilege—all the things we pretend can save us. Together we grieve the dying; together we celebrate babies. And together, in the midst of persecution and trials, we find ourselves welcomed into the amazing, ever-growing kingdom, one that is far better than any we can imagine or occupy or purchase for ourselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.