

**The Faith of Jesus in a Pluralistic World**  
**Part 9: Labor Day In the Kingdom of God**

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Scripture: Genesis 1:26-27; Matthew 19:16-30; 20:1-16

Excerpts from Hadith Mughni al-Muhtaaj (4/95)

## **I. Sour Grapes**

One of Jesus's most difficult teachings to hear with an open mind is his instruction to a wealthy young man who asks Jesus what good deed he must do to inherit eternal life. When it becomes clear that he is already doing what is necessary, Jesus offers him a way to do still better: "If you wish to be *perfect*," he says (emphasis mine), "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." According to Matthew's Gospel, the young man "went away grieving, for he had many possessions." Jesus then observed, "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. 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." (Matthew 19:21-24)

Does Jesus's teaching apply to us?

Just because the young man who approached Jesus is called "wealthy," he's not so different from you and me. The average American not only has more stuff than he did, but better stuff. If you're skeptical, just ask yourself this: would you swap places with a wealthy person in Jesus's day? Would you swap your cell phone and computer for sheets of papyrus and leather? You swap your air-conditioned and heated home, and your Sealy Posturepedic mattress for an ivory bed in a castle without climate control? Would you even swap a well-used Ford Fiesta for a chariot? (Maybe in summer, but how about winter?)

Beyond our physical possessions, chances are that we would not want to swap our health care system for theirs, our road system for theirs, or our supermarkets for theirs. No, if it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for wealthy people in Jesus's day to sell their possessions and give the money to the poor, my guess is that it is now harder for an elephant to pass through the needle than for the average, middle-class American to accept Jesus's invitation.

Thankfully, when Jesus's disciples hear all this about the wealthy and ask, "who then can be saved?" Jesus reassures them that, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

I invite you to consider two things this morning, just as an intellectual exercise, not a recommendation, based on Jesus's reassurance:

First, let's take as a given that not only are all things possible for God, but that God fully intends to get us through that needle, one way or another, whether or not we sell our possessions and give the money to the poor. I think Jesus's entire life, death, and resurrection assure us of this.

Second, I invite you to consider the possibility – at least for a moment, as an intellectual exercise – that Jesus knows what he is talking about; that if you are a person of even modest wealth in America today, you will become extraordinarily happy if you take up the invitation that the wealthy person in the story passed by; that if you sell what you have, give away the money to the poor, and endeavor to follow the way of life that Jesus teaches, you will look back one day and say, “I’m really glad I did that.” In fact, you will say, “I can’t imagine *not* doing that.” If Jesus knows what he’s talking about, then you can very well expect to be saying this.

But how would this work?

Let’s say you’re a millionaire. What could you do if you liquidated everything and had your own personal charitable foundation with one million dollars in the bank?

I suggest that you would have to be strategic in your giving. In other words, I don’t think Jesus would want you to simply write a million-dollar check to a charity in Africa. This might be gratifying for a moment, and probably a lot of people would be helped. Yet, I doubt it would be ultimately satisfying since you would never likely have any significant interaction with those whose lives you changed. Plus, what would you do about food and shelter? In helping one charity that alleviates poverty abroad, you might become a burden on a similar charity closer to home!

I suspect that many of you have better ideas of what to do with the money than I have, but here’s a couple of things I would do:

First, I would draw wisdom from our two partner faiths: Judaism and Islam.

Judaism asserts that all people are created in God’s image and likeness. If this is true, then it is just as true that if you offer someone kindness in God’s name, you are likely to receive kindness in return. If you offer generosity in God’s name, you are likely to receive generosity in return – even if you never ask for a thing. That’s because the part of God that is within us loves and adores the part of God that is in others, especially when we’re receiving a blessing directly from that person. This tells me that, if blessings are administered in a strategic way – meaning, that you don’t just give your money to anyone, but only to people who are at least vaguely in touch with the image of God inside them, you are likely to receive something back, even if you never ask for anything in return – in fact, *especially* if you never ask.

If you think I’m being overly calculating by envisioning giving my million dollars only to those who are actively in touch with the image of God within them, bear in mind that this is MY million dollars, not yours. I am giving it to people who are poor and in severe need and I’m trying to stay alive after giving all my money away. I do not believe that Jesus wants us all to be perpetually poor and struggling to survive. I do believe, however, that Jesus wants to give us something that money absolutely cannot buy: an experience of the richness of heaven in the here-and-now, not merely the great by-and-by; and the deep knowing that when you lean fully into God, God leans fully into you - often directly in and through the image of God that is lodged deep in the heart of our neighbor.

From Islam, I would draw from a statement in the Hadiths (writings not in the Qur’an but are attributed to Mohammed). When Mohammed was asked to define who one’s “neighbor” is, in

relation to God's command to "love your neighbor as yourself," he is said to have instructed people to count 40 houses in each direction. (*Mughni al-Muhtaj* 4/95) In other words, the "neighbor" we are to love as our very selves is not defined as many Christians define it as "any person who is in need" but as anyone with whom you have close and direct contact. Whether or not he literally meant that we are responsible for 40 houses in every direction, the gist is that we are supposed to love our *neighborhood* as ourselves.

In light of Jesus's invitation to the wealthy young man, and the Jewish understanding that you experience God in other people because the image of God is in each one of us, I think Mohammed's understanding of "neighbor" is genius.

So here's what I'd do. I would spend my million dollars in my neighborhood. Lucky for me, there are a lot of poor people in my neighborhood. Poor people who are, by and large, very sincere, hard-working, and responsible people.

One of these is my friend John (not his real name). John is a veteran on disability, who works for cash as a handyman when his bad back isn't laying him flat. John has made some bad choices in his life – and he lives with regret each and every day. But he's impeccably honest, compassionate, and never forgets a favor. I would gather John and a handful of others and offer to either pay rent and utilities in the places they're currently living in or, in John's case, pay rent and utilities for a house that is far better than where he's living – a house that even includes a guest room.

Do you think that if any of these people knew that Melanie and I were doing this for them but going homeless in order to do it, that they wouldn't offer us their guest room – and gladly? If we wanted, we could probably go a year or more just in the guest rooms offered to us, rotating every few months so as not to be a burden on anyone. At the end of a year without these people having to pay rent or utilities, most of them would likely have saved enough money to stay in their homes. And since Melanie and I would not be quitting our jobs, and would also not be paying rent, utilities, car payments, gasoline, insurance, or any other cost associated with having lots of "stuff," we would be in a fine position to move out with a comfortable next egg as well.

I mentioned cars. How would we get to work? Well, there are a few hard-working people in our neighborhood who can't afford cars so they take the bus. I don't particularly like riding on buses. So I'd purchase nice, gently-used cars for a handful of these people, along with insurance and gas for a year. How many of these folks do you suppose would not jump at the chance to be part of a carpool system that would get Melanie and me to work and back?

So far, that puts me at about \$800k remaining in my charitable foundation once I've assured that I have housing and transportation covered for a year and can be putting the lion's share of our income into our personal savings account. You realize, don't you, that Jesus didn't ask the rich man to perpetually give his money away, or quit his day job. He asked him to give it all away once.

No, if I were to be strategic in my giving, I'll bet I could use the rest of that \$800k to do some pretty creative things in my neighborhood that would turn people's lives around and ensure that, until I'm on my feet and thriving again, my wife and I will never lack for a thing.

It would not even surprise me if, between what we could put into savings for a year or two, and the opportunities that would open up to us from dozens of now hugely appreciative, and fiercely loyal, friends, that Melanie and I would eventually be able to recoup our million dollars (if we had it to begin with), or at least come close.

Of course, I'm not suggesting anyone give away all they have as a money-making scheme. I'm not even suggesting you do it for any reason. (This is just an intellectual exercise, right?). What I am suggesting, though, is that what Jesus was after through his offer to the wealthy young man was to help him live with more than he needs to survive, and far more friends, living in a far stronger neighborhood, than he could have ever imagined possible. Jesus was offering him the opportunity to do the one thing that seems impossible to mortals yet is entirely possible with God's help: to trade the riches of the world for the riches of heaven *in* this world.

## II. Fine Wine

Okay, that's enough for this intellectual exercise. You're probably wondering why I haven't addressed the parable of the vineyard workers in this sermon and spent all my time on the first story. I have spent nearly all my time on the first story because, if you understand the kind of community of grateful, fiercely loyal friends, who are living faithful, blazingly brilliant lives that Jesus is trying to build through the wealthy young man, then it's easy to understand what Jesus is trying to accomplish in his parable. So now I can be brief!

The vineyard earns the consternation of the day laborers who agreed on a certain wage in the morning and work all day, only to discover that the laborers hired for just one hour at the end of the day are also paid a full day's wages. Why didn't those who had toiled since morning receive more than they had agreed on?

They don't receive more because the vineyard owner is exercising strategic generosity. He hasn't shorted the workers who have been there the full day by paying them a full day's wage. He's simply being unusually generous with some. But why?

He pays them a day's wage because he knows they have not been sitting idle for the full day because they are lazy but because no one has given them the work they so desperately need. For the average day laborer in Jesus's time, the money you made on one day fed your family on the next. If you didn't work, your family didn't eat.

Just how grateful – and loyal – do you suppose these day laborers would be toward this vineyard owner who saved their families from starving when he didn't have to – and who privileged their well-being over his reputation with the other workers? Is there any task they would not gladly do the next time they were hired? Do you not suppose that they would be hoping and praying for the success of this vineyard owner, and willing to help him be successful, if they knew that he's the kind of owner who has his employee's backs?

If those vineyard workers who complained about the apparent unfairness really understood what the vineyard owner was doing, one might imagine that they would become fiercely loyal to the vineyard owner as well. Who would not want to work – and work quite hard - for someone they can logically expect has their backs, too, should they ever be in need? My guess is that if the vineyard owner acted in this way consistently, but only when there was true and

direct need rather than when people simply wanted to go swimming all day and get paid like they hadn't, his employees would make sure that he produced only the finest wines that sold for the highest prices - and that if ever the owner himself got into financial trouble, perhaps through a failed crop, his employees would be right there with him, doing whatever it took to keep the operation going. For they would know that their financial health, and that of the owner, were bound together in a community created through grace and compassion.

So if you are a person of wealth and you don't want to take Jesus up on his invitation to sell everything and give the money to the poor, perhaps you will find this second invitation more appealing. Don't give away the farm. Just create the healthiest farm you can by planting seeds of generosity, not just plants.

If you do not happen to be a person of wealth, then I trust you can find a message in this sermon anyway - even if it is only to celebrate those who extend generosity to people in need rather than to begrudge them their generosity.

Happy Labor Day Weekend.