

Jesus' Big Mistake

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Introduction:

Church growth has become a science and an art. Books have been written about all the things we need to do to evangelize. We hear catch phrases like “seeker sensitive,” “relationship evangelism,” “bridge building,” “felt needs,” and on the list goes. There is nothing wrong with these terms in themselves and each may have their place, but recently I was reminded of **Mark 10:17-27**. A rich young ruler approached Jesus asking, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Consider who this man was. He was really the first century Jewish parallel of a yuppie. He was a young, upwardly mobile professional. He was well off. Surely he would be an asset to the financial needs of Jesus and his itinerant band of followers. If Jesus was careful with how he handled this one, not only would He catch a fish, but He would catch the big one. Here we have the opportunity to be a fly on the wall as Jesus demonstrates before His disciples exactly how to cast a line and reel in the fish. Yet, by modern standards of seeker sensitive, bridge building, relationship based evangelism, Jesus blew it. In fact, for a minute, if we have been weaned on modern evangelistic methods we almost expect Jesus to turn around afterward and say to His disciples, “Now look, I have just demonstrated an example to you of how not to be fishers of men. Let’s consider My big mistakes.” In fact, take a look at the big mistakes Jesus made here if the modern evangelistic experts are right.

Discussion:

I. Jesus Big Mistakes

A. *Jesus did not work to build a relationship bridge.*

1. **Modern Evangelism Expert Outlook:** “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Jesus should have tabled the hard lessons against materialism until He had taken the time to let the rich young ruler get to know Him. Once they had made a real relationship connection, then Jesus could have started addressing spiritual issues.
2. **Evangelism School with Jesus:** According to **Mark 10:21**, Jesus loved the rich young ruler. But He didn’t wait around for the rich young ruler to figure that out before letting him know what he needed to hear. This ruler was the epitome of seeker. Surely this was a man with whom Jesus could develop a relationship and bring him into the fold step by slow step.
3. Should we work to develop relationships with people and let them see how much we care? Of course. But let us not think relationship building equals evangelism. Evangelism means telling people about Jesus and how they need to respond to Him.

B. *Jesus did not address the rich young ruler’s felt needs.*

1. **Modern Evangelism Expert Outlook:** Jesus should have figured out a way to present the message of discipleship and commitment such that it hit the rich young ruler in his felt needs. Obviously, the ruler felt no need to give all his possessions away, but he felt the need to attain eternal life. Jesus should have invited the ruler to come along so he could see first hand how to live for eternity. After all, if you want to know how to inherit eternal life, surely just hanging around Jesus for a while ought to give you a pretty good idea.
2. **Evangelism School with Jesus:** Jesus didn’t address the ruler’s felt needs. He addressed his actual needs. The rich young ruler had a god above Jehovah God—his many possessions. He only felt the need for some extra steps to get him into heaven. What he really needed was a complete life make-over.
3. Should we give thought to the felt needs of the prospects all around us? Absolutely. We can often get people to their real need by starting on their felt need. However, we need to understand painting pictures of felt needs merely feeds the unbeliever’s selfishness and produces converts that founder the moment they don’t feel their needs being met.

C. *Jesus did not tailor His message to his target audience’s cultural and demographic background.*

1. **Modern Evangelism Expert Outlook:** Jesus should have stepped back and figured out what made this rich young ruler tick. What moved him at his innermost being? Had Jesus taken time to consider this man’s cultural and demographic background, he would have surely known you cannot attract the well-off with messages of selling everything. Jesus big mistake here is revealed by the fact that selling everything we own and giving it to the poor is not even a strict requirement of God’s law, consider **Acts 5:4**. Jesus didn’t have to preach

this lesson to the rich young ruler. He should have tailored His message to what would attract His target audience to Him. You can attract more flies with honey than vinegar.

2. **Evangelism School with Jesus:** Jesus did not tailor His message to what would attract someone from the rich young ruler's cultural and demographic background. He tailored His message to His target audience's spiritual need. There was only one way for this man to inherit eternal life. He had to cut loose the hold his material goods had on him.
3. Should we consider our prospects' background as we teach them? No doubt. Paul himself demonstrated this in **I Corinthians 9:19-23**. However, we need to remember in Christ demographics and cultural background mean nothing (**Galatians 3:28**). Jesus expects the same committed discipleship from every culture and every demographic. Evangelism is not tailoring the discipleship commitment to be attractive to each demographic, it is teaching each demographic to lose themselves in service to Jesus Christ.

D. *Jesus called attention to minor mistakes.*

1. **Modern Evangelism Expert Outlook:** Jesus should not have called attention to the minor faux pas about calling Him a good teacher. We all knew what the rich young ruler meant and jumping on every disagreement or mistake merely antagonizes the prospect.
2. **Evangelism School with Jesus:** Jesus did highlight this issue because He intended to provoke the rich young ruler's thought. If the ruler was going to call Jesus good, ultimately, he needed to recognize Jesus as God in the flesh. Jesus wanted the ruler and those listening to think about this. Perhaps that might stir up some thought to bring the person around.
3. Should we jump on every minor mistake made in a conversation with a prospect? Of course not. If you do, you will major in minors and never get anywhere. However, we need to keep our eyes open to issues we can highlight to generate thought and provoke possible discussion. Consider the following example. People commonly ask questions like, "What kind of church do you attend?" Or "What denomination are you part of?" More and more sound brethren are simply responding: "Church of Christ." When you point out that is just not correct, we do not attend a "Church of Christ" kind of church, nor are we part of a "Church of Christ" denomination, the person will almost inevitably say, "But you know what they meant." Yes, I do know what they meant. But now they don't know what we mean. Instead of prompting a teachable moment that might provoke discussion, you shut down the discussion with an incorrect answer. Sometimes it is good to call into question the minor mistakes if they lead to bigger issues that might stimulate good study.

E. *Jesus demanded too much too soon.*

1. **Modern Evangelism Expert Outlook:** The rich young ruler had not been with Jesus like the apostles. He had not traveled with Jesus or learned all of his ways. He had not been brought up hearing Jesus' strong messages of total commitment. That was just way too much to put on the rich young ruler right away. Jesus should never have overwhelmed the ruler with the message of absolute, total discipleship commitment right up front. Instead, Jesus should have brought this little infant seeker along slowly, only demanding as much discipleship as he was ready to handle at the time. If you ask too much, too soon, you are liable to kill your chances with a prospect before you even get started.
2. **Evangelism School with Jesus:** Jesus doesn't want half-baked, half-committed disciples of any sort. From the very beginning, Jesus wanted the rich young ruler to know if he wanted eternal life he was going to have to give up everything. Jesus didn't believe He was asking too much too soon. He believed He was asking just enough at just the right time because that was what it would take for this man to have eternal life.
3. Do we need to be careful about overwhelming a prospect at the first contact? I am sure we do. But we must not make the knee-jerk reaction of so many today acting as if we can really get someone to a true commitment progressively after they have decided to follow with us. If we get someone into the baptistery through the teaching of a half-baked commitment, they will almost always only be halfway committed. Why do we think if we soften the teaching and water down the message that we will help more people? We may get more people to hang with us, but we are not turning them into committed disciples. Rather, we turn them into people we constantly fear will leave if we teach what true commitment is really about. And since these guys are **rich** young rulers, that scares us to death.

- F. *Jesus was too exclusive, viewing the law-abiding rich young ruler as outside God's kingdom.*
1. **Modern Evangelism Expert Outlook:** In **Mark 10:23**, Jesus demonstrated an underlying problem that no doubt came out in the way He talked to and looked at the rich young ruler. Jesus viewed the kingdom as exclusive to those who would give up everything and follow Him. Despite the fact that this rich young ruler was faithful as best he knew how to the 10 commandments, Jesus viewed him as an outsider. If we ever want to effectively evangelize, we have to quit the us/them mentality and be more inclusive.
 2. **Evangelism School with Jesus:** The rich young ruler may have had similarities with Jesus. There may have been some common ground upon which to work. But the rich young ruler was not walking the path to eternal life, no matter how spiritual or supposedly obedient to the Law he had been. He was not entering the kingdom. In what way could Jesus act as though he was?
 3. Should we work to find common ground with others? Obviously. A great example is when Paul, in **Acts 17:23**, talked about the unknown God to be able to talk about their need for Jesus. But if we move from finding common ground with which to start our teaching to being more inclusive, we suddenly lose the need to teach others. If we start viewing folks who are simply similar to Christians in some beliefs and practices as though they really are like us, then what motivation do we have to teach them how to be saved? We practically believe they are saved already. We are only motivated to evangelize when we look at those who are on the outside as on the outside. But we must look on them with love and want to give them the message they need.

II. Lessons for us.

A. *Don't judge the effectiveness of evangelism based on response.*

1. We are told, "Find what God is blessing and do that." That statement means we need to look at what other churches are doing that increases their membership and follow their examples. However, don't forget **Matthew 7:13-14**. If only few will find the narrow way, what makes us think the congregations growing the fastest are the ones really blessed by God instead of deceived by the devil?
2. I have preached this sermon somewhat tongue in cheek. No evangelism expert would really comment on Jesus' big mistakes. But if this story had been slightly different. If it had been how Edwin Crozier tried to evangelize the rich young ruler, every one of them would have pointed out these mistakes. Their biggest piece of evidence would have been **Mark 10:22**. If I had been more effective, the man would have stayed. After all, he was a seeker. I blew it. But who among us will say Jesus blew it. He didn't make mistakes, yet He evangelized in the exact opposite way from the modern experts.
3. Finally, I must anticipate one objection. I have no doubt someone will say, "But Edwin, this is Jesus. He knew the hearts of men and we're not Jesus." That is true. Jesus knew how the ruler would respond, yet, He still evangelized him this way. If Jesus is our example (cf. **I Corinthians 11:1**), how can I say I should evangelize in some different way than He did.

B. *Don't fear rejection.*

1. Too often we are paralyzed as we try to figure out the fail-proof way to evangelize someone. We read books. We ask preachers. We get together and talk about it. We do everything to prepare for evangelism, we just never get around to evangelism. That's ok, because at least we have never been rejected.
2. Keep our example, Jesus Christ, in mind. The rich young ruler was not the only rejecter. Do we forget the day Jesus ran off about 5000 people (**John 6**)? Do we forget when Jesus was on the cross, everyone rejected him except one thief on a cross? Do we forget that even after His resurrection only 120 out of thousands were with Him? Don't fear rejection. Just teach the gospel of Jesus as best you can. When people reject us, we are in good company.

C. *Our job is to get the needed message out and let God deal with the rest.*

1. I know I am beginning to seem like a one trick pony. This point seems to make it into most of my lessons these days. I keep saying this mostly to remind myself and help me overcome my fears and hang ups about evangelism. But our job is not to cause church growth. That is God's job (**I Corinthians 3:5-7**).

2. Let's do our job. Let's teach people about Jesus. Let's call people to totally committed, fruit-bearing discipleship and then leave it up to God.
- D. *With God all things are possible.*
1. While preparing for this sermon, I pulled out some of my books on growing churches and remembered some of the things I had heard from "growth experts" and even other preachers. I kept hearing about all the things that won't work and all the people we probably won't be able to convert. But then I read **Mark 10:27**, "All things are possible with God" (ESV).
 2. Remember **Ephesians 3:20-21**. God can do far more abundantly than all we ask or think. The fact is we can't save anyone anyway. We can't grow churches. With man it is impossible. Why then do we try to come up with plans based on how effective we can be with specific kinds of people? The reality is true evangelism and church growth only comes from God. Let's rely on Him. Let's begin with prayer. Then just spread His message in every way we can to everyone we can and leave the rest up to Him.

Conclusion:

This study has been almost earth shaking for me. It has called into question many of the standard practices and tactics of evangelism and church growth with which I have been enamored for years. Even as I read some of my books on church growth with the active mindset that they were not teaching what Jesus was practicing here, I was enamored with their statements. As I finished this study, a soul searching question occurred to me. Why do we talk about all the mistakes of those who evangelize like Jesus did but become so enamored with the completely different tactics of modern experts in large churches? The answer, brethren, is perhaps not so flattering. Is it that the rich young ruler is the kind of member we want? After all, think of all we could do with rich members who contribute well. Think of all the problems we would have if we started converting the poor and the downtrodden—the very people so attracted to Jesus. Is the reason we are enamored with modern evangelistic methods because the rich young ruler is the kind of member we want and we already know he won't respond to Jesus' methods of evangelism? Or is the problem even worse? Is it that we know we wouldn't even respond to an evangelism that demanded total commitment and sacrifice of self and so why should we expect others to? Brethren, we need to do some soul searching. Are we evangelizing? If not, why not? If so, who and how? Are we calling people to absolute and total commitment to Jesus? Are we demonstrating that kind of commitment?