



The rich young man in today's Gospel displays a restlessness – a restlessness that is present in every human heart. And this restlessness that we all experience in our hearts is by design: God created us with a hole in our hearts, as I tell the kids. We all have a spiritual hole in our hearts that can only be filled by Him. Again, this is by design from God so that we would always reach up to Him. As St. Augustine would say in his famous phrase: “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in you.”

And so this rich young man comes to Jesus with this restlessness. His question is full of this restlessness: “Good teacher, what must I do to gain eternal life?” He is searching. He is looking for something more in his life. Indeed, the heart that God created in him is restless, longing to be filled by God.

Notice that Jesus' first response to him is: “Keep the commandments.” You see, a person's heart can only be filled by God when the way has been prepared. If a person is continuing purposely to engage in serious sin, the way is blocked, the heart is clogged. God's presence cannot come into the heart. So by keeping the commandments, the way is paved for God to come in.

The rich young man answers sincerely: “Yes, I have done all this. I have kept the commandments from my youth.” We know by Jesus' response that this young man has kept the commandments. He's not playing games here. The scripture tells us, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”

Do you see how beautiful and powerful this is? God isn't just this static being up there in the clouds somewhere. God responds to us. He reaches out in love to us. Jesus looks at the young man and loves him back for his sincerity in keeping the commandments.

But, as we see, keeping the commandments is only the first step. It is only a paving of the way. The young man has kept the commandments and yet he is still restless, still searching for God, for eternal life. Jesus reveals to the young man what he is really looking for: “Go, sell what you and give to the poor...then come, follow me.”

“Follow me.” “Be with me.” “Walk with me.” “Stay with me.”

What fills our heart, what eases our restlessness, is living our life staying close to the Lord, walking with Him through life. But look what the young man does. He turns the Lord down. Imagine – he turns down the Lord's invitation. Notice what happens: He goes away sad. Sadness is the hallmark of self-seeking.

This unbelievable story today prompts us to look at our response to the Lord's invitation to us. Is there something that we are clinging to that is keeping us from fully following the Lord?

Maybe it's lust – like St. Augustine. For him it was lust that kept him from the Lord until he was ready to let go.

Maybe it is material things. Maybe it's the need always to be in control.

So there it is for the young man. Right before him, what he was searching for, but he has a decision to make. Because, following Jesus cannot be on our own terms. There is simply not enough room in our hearts for God and for the things that we cling to. In the case of this rich young man, it was his riches that he was clinging to. Jesus invites him to let go, to begin a new life, to be close to Him and to walk with Him. It is all right there in front of him, everything that his heart longed for.

But here's the mystery of human freedom. He can't let go – better said, he won't let go, he chooses not to let go of his riches. The problem isn't necessarily having wealth or possessions. It's the attachment to these things that is the problem, an attachment that keeps one from following God fully.

Behind all these things – and behind anything else we can think of that keeps us from following the Lord fully – is fear. The rich young man was fearful that by giving up all he possessed he wouldn't really be happy in following the Lord. The Lord invites each of us every day to let go of the things we try to cling to. He invites us in our hearts to let go of everything that we have, and sometimes literally to let go of them and to follow Him. Then we will not go away from Jesus sad but will know the joy and peace of being close to Him and of following Him always. This is what our hearts really long for.

**Fr. Mark Gurtner at St. Anthony de Padua Church, South Bend
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