

**The Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time B - God Is Demanding Because He Loves Us**  
October 13, 2024

In this Sunday's Gospel reading St Mark makes a surprising observation as he tells us about this encounter between Jesus and the rich young man (10:17-31). After the young man explains that he has followed the commandments since his youth, St Mark tells us that: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." It was the look of the Creator directed towards his beloved creature, or the look of an older brother directed towards a younger brother in need, or the look of a father gazing upon a son who is striving to do all the right things. But what may be even more surprising is what Jesus said to the young man after giving him this look of love. He tells him to go and sell all his possessions – the very things that this young man is most attached to. Now, if Jesus really loved this young man, why would he demand him to give up what he valued most and make him so uncomfortable? We all know the answer: it's because love seeks what is best for the beloved. Love by its very nature is demanding; it will never settle for mediocrity. And this young man, because he was so attached to money, possessions, and worldly success, was in great danger of falling into a mediocre, stifling, and frustrated life. And so Jesus, out of love, invites him to choose the path of wisdom instead of comfort, the path of following God's will instead of self will. The Lord is constantly doing the same for us: looking at us with deep, personal love, and inviting us to follow him more closely, even though it will mean leaving our comfort behind. We all like to stick to what is familiar and comfortable. Just like the young man who is living a comfortable life with his wealth and possessions. So when Jesus is offering him true, lasting wisdom that his money has not given him so far, he hesitates and does not want to take the risk. Indeed, the wisdom that comes from God measures differently and ranks power and riches as nothing. We can't buy our way into heaven. Wealth mixed with worship of God is like oil mixed with water.

The young man's biggest boast was that he had done nothing wrong in his life, but Jesus was not all that impressed. Christ was more interested in the use he had made of his life, in the good he had done and whether he was prepared to go out of his way to help others. This young man's vision of life was limited to his possessions. He went away saddened because he was unable to make the sacrifice. To Jesus, he is not a model to be imitated but a warning to be singled out to his disciples. The Seven Capital Sins identify the seven most common "somethings" that we tend to put in God's place. These "somethings" are good in themselves, but they become obstacles to our happiness when we give them first place. Pride puts our own achievements in God's place, as if they were capable of giving us the meaning and fulfillment that only comes from God. Then there is lust which puts sexual pleasure in God's place. Gluttony puts the pleasures of food, drink, or drugs in God's place. Anger puts our own self-will in God's place ("my way or the highway!"). Envy puts our reputation or popularity before God. Sloth puts our comfort before God. And greed, as in the case of this rich young man, idolizes money. Because of original sin, and the sins of other people that have wounded us, and our own sins, our souls are out of shape. They are bloated with selfish tendencies and weighed down by self-centred habits and complexes. The Holy Spirit comes to us at confirmation to be a kind of personal trainer, to help us get our souls back in shape, so that we can come to enjoy the spiritual health and fruitfulness we were created for. And, like every good personal trainer, one of the Holy Spirit's main jobs is to push us out of our comfort zone, spiritually speaking, so that we can exercise faith, hope, and wisdom, and thereby attain spiritual maturity. This is the common experience of every true Christian. To reach new life in Christ, we have to leave behind, gradually and often painfully, our old, self-focused life. The saints too were led to spiritual maturity along this narrow path – they weren't born holy; God was demanding with them too, because he loved them. This is true even for someone like St Bede, the famous monk and abbot from eighth-century England, who spent his entire life (from the age of seven) in a monastery. At one point when he was a young monk, a plague devastated Northumbria, the part of England where his monastery was located. In those days, monasteries were large communities, sometimes numbering over two hundred monks. Rather quickly, this epidemic emptied out St Bede's community, until one day only himself and his Abbot were left to sing the Psalms in the monastery chapel. God didn't invent hardship and suffering – those are the result of original sin. But he has chosen to use them as instruments to help us grow in wisdom, courage, and every virtue. He is demanding with us, as he was with the rich young man, but every demand is the fruit of his love.

Jesus told the disciples that it is harder for the wealthy to enter the kingdom than for a camel to go through "the eye of the needle" which is a small, short, narrow gate used mostly by locals. In Jerusalem at the time, when big merchant caravans came to the city for business, they had to strip their camels bare – taking off all supply

packs, saddles, and trade goods in order to get in through this gate (the eye of the needle). Then they could lead them through on foot. We are like those merchants when we are loaded down with so many self-centred hopes, habits, and worries, that we are unable to enter into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Maybe we still think that the right house, job, promotion, spouse, bank account, or award is going to fill our hearts with the happiness we long for. But it won't: those things must take second place to our friendship with Jesus Christ; in him alone can we find the inner peace, meaning, and strength we so ardently desire. Let's consider what's hindering our progress along the path of wisdom, and let's ask God, who is looking down on us with infinite love, to help us get rid of it. True wisdom keeps God in first place in our lives. It never lets the false promises of worldly success or wealth interfere with our following Christ and his commandments. But we live in a fallen world, a world in which greed often seems more powerful than wisdom. Greed is directly involved in all of the tragedies of our times: human trafficking, war, abortion, the drug trade, genocide, political corruption... these horrible realities are hard to get rid of, because someone, somewhere, is getting rich off them. Patterns of greed also contribute to periods of economic hardship – not only greed among financial and political leaders, but also our own irresponsible tendencies to spend money we don't have, creating unhealthy debt. How can we grow in true wisdom when we are surrounded by these subtle seductions of a consumer society? Today's Second Reading gives us an answer. It reminds us that "the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword." The word of God is a weapon of wisdom, good to defend against temptations and to cut away obstacles and difficulties. Where do we find the word of God? Most readily, we find it in the Bible, the inspired word of God, recorded, preserved, and interpreted for us by the Church. It is true that God demands a lot from us, because he loves us. He never asks us to walk the path of wisdom alone. He accompanies us with his gifts, like prayer, the sacraments, Church teaching, and the Bible. As Pope Francis said in his June 14, 2015 Angelus: "The Word of God makes things grow, it gives life. And here, I would like to remind you once again, of the importance of having the Gospel, the Bible, close at hand. A small Gospel in your purse, in your pocket and to nourish yourselves every day with this living Word of God. Read a passage from the Gospel every day, a passage from the Bible. Please don't ever forget this. Because this is the power that makes the life of the Kingdom of God sprout within us." So, let's respond to Christ's look of love by renewing our conviction that only he can give us the happiness we long for, and by renewing our commitment to strive to know and follow him better every day, using the Bible as our preferred weapon of wisdom. How do we follow Jesus? Jesus always tells us that if we want to be his disciples, we must deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow him. Following him is not just admiring his way of life like the young man did but to live it fully and not as part-time followers. Discipleship is always costly and following Jesus makes very stark demands on our lifestyle. Our following Christ means making the best use of our present situation and placing our lives in his hands. We have only one life and Christ is inviting us to leave the world a better place for our presence than when we found it. We achieve this by helping others and not by grasping everything for ourselves. We have to reflect God's love in our lives.