

RUNNING AWAY FROM GOD
Turning Your Back on Jesus
Matthew 19:16-22
January 31, 2010

One of the all-time classic novels and movies, as you well know, is *Gone With the Wind*. You may not know, however, that some say that Margaret Mitchell based her book on real people whose true-life story was just as dramatic and suspenseful as the fictional portrayal we all know and love.

According to one urban legend, there was a Rhett, but his real name was Rhett Turnipseed. No wonder Ms. Mitchell changed the name to Butler—I just can't see Clark Gable playing anybody named Rhett Turnipseed.

And there really was a Scarlett O'Hara, whose real name was Emelyn Louise Hannon.

In fact, Rhett did walk out on his young love, Emelyn, but before the war when he'd joined the Confederate Army. When the war was over, Rhett Turnipseed became a drifter and a gambler. He ended up in Nashville, where he ran a floating crap game. One night he wandered into a revival meeting at the Ryman Auditorium, which later became the Grand Ol' Opry. There he decided to turn his life over to Jesus.

Soon after his conversion, Rhett Turnipseed enrolled at Vanderbilt University and became a Methodist circuit riding preacher. In one of his congregations, a young woman in his flock had run away and was working in a house of prostitution in St. Louis. Pastor Turnipseed rode his horse across country to find her, which he did, but incredibly, the madam of the house of ill-repute where his wayward member of his flock worked turned out to be none other than his former love, Emelyn Louise Hannon, who was now going by the name of Ms. Scarlett.

Ms. Scarlett refused to let Rhett see the young woman, so Rhett challenged her to a game of cards. If he won, the young girl would go free; if Scarlett won, she would remain. The happy ending of this story is that Pastor Rhett Turnipseed won.

But the happy ending doesn't end there. The young girl married well and became the matriarch of a leading family in the state of Tennessee. Emelyn, so impressed with the change in Rhett's life, became a Christian and joined the Methodist church. Eventually she opened an orphanage for Cherokee children. She died in 1903, and if you visit Tahlequah, OK, you would find her grave there. (I really don't know if this is a true story or not—I'm thinking the author, Wesley Pruden, editor in Chief of the Washington Times, was just fooling around with a possible sequel for the original, but you can find this story under his name --"More Bad News for Scarlett O'Hara" [The Washington Times](#), May 18, 2007)

Don't we all just love a good prodigal story? You know the kind I mean—like the parable Jesus told in Luke 15 about folks who live wild, self-destructive lives but who finally hit bottom, see the light and return God's purpose?

We love stories of lost sheep that are found, and sinners who find forgiveness and run-aways who are brought safely home.

But this morning's scripture is a conundrum for us. It tells of a person who never did run away from God, or at least not in the evident way as other biblical prodigals that we've been studying in this sermon series. He hadn't lived a life of reprobation. He had followed all the rules successfully, probably even better than some of the religious leaders of his time.

He was a good guy, a "normie" in twelve-step lingo.

And because he had been faithful--according to the religious teaching he had received from childhood--God had blessed him with earthly material wealth. He had grown up learning proverbs like this "Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous." (13:21) He had lived righteously all his life, and his religion had told him that his material wealth was proof of God's pleasure in him.

But still, there must have been something missing in his life, because on that day when Jesus was preaching in Judea, the day that he blessed the children, this young man came up to him and asked him for something more.

"Teacher, what deed must I do to have eternal life?"

Was he seeking immortality, the fountain of youth? Was he seeking certainty for his place in heaven? Or was he looking for something deeper, more abundant in the life he was living on earth? The Greek phrase he used could have referred to any one or all of the three meanings.

Was he a greedy scoundrel who wasn't satisfied with the life he had been given and wanted more? Or was he true seeker, wanting to know the next step in his life of faith? The text does not reveal his true motivations. We can't hear his tone of voice or see the expression on his face.

Perhaps even Jesus was unsure, and so he tested the waters with his next statement. "In order to receive this life you are seeking, you must keep the commandments."

"Which ones?" the man asked.

"You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, but you shall honor your mother and father. In other words, love your neighbor as yourself."

"That's great," the man sighed with relief. "I've followed all those to the 't'".

If only Jesus had stopped there. If only Jesus had not gone on.

Because, you see, for those of us who have never run away from God, for those of us who have always followed the religious rules, for those of us who have lived a good life all their lives, there's an unspoken hope that surely there must be some reward for right living.

That may have been all the guy in the scripture wanted—assurance. He may have just wanted Jesus to tell him to keep on doing what he was doing, that he was on the right train on the track to heaven.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He said to the rich young ruler, "go, sell what you possess, give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me."

He invited the young man to be his disciple. Just as he offered the invitation to Peter and Andrew, James and John, and the other 8 disciples, he was offering this young man a place as one of his faithful entourage. What an honor!

It's like being given the gold ticket to Hollywood if you just auditioned for American Idol. The only problem is—you've got to leave everything you've worked for, everything you've accumulated in the past behind. You have to start over, start fresh, start free.

The young man's face fell, and slowly, he turned his back on Jesus, and walked away. Let me say that again—he turned his back on Jesus and walked away.

This is most of our stories in this room. We live fairly decent lives—we follow the commandments, we love our neighbors.

But we are never completely "done" with what Jesus wants us to do. We never reach Buddhist Nirvana nor Wesley's perfection. He continues to call us deeper, to more sacrificial ministry, and each time he calls, we have the choice—do we follow, or do we turn our back on Jesus.

Jesus knew that when we start asking questions like the rich young ruler—when we ask those questions about reaching a goal of perfection for righteous living on earth—that we haven't really understood God's plan for us yet.

It's not a matter of reaching a goal—it's a matter of living our lives on a daily basis, choosing to follow Jesus, putting Jesus as the priority in our lives.

And Jesus was not this guy's priority. God's Incarnate Word was not his priority. His stuff was.

Now we all know people who put their stuff first in their lives. We know people like the prosperous, young investment banker who was driving a new BMW sedan on a mountain road during a snow storm. As he veered around one sharp turn, he lost control and began sliding off the road toward a steep cliff. At the last moment he unbuckled his seat belt, flung open his door, and leaped from

the car, which then plummeted to the bottom of the ravine and burst into a ball of flames.

Although he had escaped with his life, the man suffered a ghastly injury. Somehow his arm had been caught near the hinge of the door as he jumped and had been torn off at the shoulder. A passing trucker saw the accident in his rearview mirror, pulled his rig to a halt and ran back to see if he could help. When he arrived at the scene, he found the banker standing at the roadside, looking down at the BMW burning in the ravine below. Incredibly the banker was oblivious to his injury and moaned, *"My BMW! My new BMW!"* The trucker pointed at the banker's shoulder and said, *"You've got bigger problems than that car. We've got to find your arm. Maybe the surgeons can sew it back on!"* The banker looked where his arm had been, paused a moment, and groaned, *"Oh no! My Rolex! My new Rolex!"* (www.sermonillustrations.com Unknown)

I don't think the rich young ruler was as out of balance as this guy. But our good and faithful rich young ruler still was not able to let go of his claim on his stuff.

And his stuff kept him from following Jesus.

And, as good of people as we are, as faithful as we want to be, it is also true for us.

As most of you know, our church is offering Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University on Wednesday nights. We have had two sessions so far, and already our eyes are opened to how our stuff causes us to run-away from God's plan for us.

Though we haven't gotten to this section in our study yet, a colleague of mine whose church went through this curriculum a couple of years ago shared with me the results of one of the sessions in which each family was asked to anonymously share their total debt—minus the mortgage. Of the 20 people gathered in that room, the total debt was over a half a million dollars. That's just 20 people in McKinney, friends. With over a half million dollars in debt! And we wonder why our government is in such bad shape? The government is

run by people just like us who get ourselves enslaved by stuff. And when we're enslaved by stuff, then we are unable to follow Jesus when he calls.

Just look at what's happening in Florida related to the disaster in Haiti. Now I know that this is a much more complex issue, but listen to the mess reported in yesterday's Miami Herald: "Military planes stopped flying the injured [from Haiti] to Florida on Wednesday, after Gov. Charlie Crist wrote to Kathleen Sebelius, secretary of Health and Human Services, asking the federal government for help covering millions of dollars in care that hospitals around the state are providing, the New York Times reported in Saturday's editions. Crist pointed out that Florida hospitals were "at capacity."

Friday, Maj. James Lowe, deputy chief of public affairs for the United States Transportation Command, told the Times that "the places they were being taken, without being specific, were not willing to continue to receive those patients without a different arrangement being worked out by the government to pay for the care."

Not so, said Dr. William O'Neill, executive dean of clinical affairs at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine. Although "there hasn't been a well-defined plan to pay for uninsured people... we are still willing to take people even if we don't know who is going to pay," O'Neill said Saturday. He said UM doctors in Haiti are not putting injured patients on planes, since they've been told that they won't be flown to Florida.

His colleague at UM's field hospital in Port-au-Prince, Dr. Barth A. Green, said Friday that "people are dying in Haiti because they can't get out."

"I have to take him at his word," O'Neill said.

He estimated that the treatment for about 50 patients brought to Ryder Trauma center would range from \$50,000-\$100,000, and called the dustup between the state and the feds "a little bit of a power contest... to see who will blink first."

Meanwhile, people are dying." (BY ELINOR J. BRECHER AND LEE LOGAN, Miami Herald News, 1/30/2010)

It's over events like this that Jesus shook his head after the Rich Young Ruler left him and said to his Disciples, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for those who love their stuff to enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Disciples were greatly astonished, because of course, in their mind the richer you are, the more blessed you are by God. "Who, then can be saved?" they asked in verse 25. But Jesus looked at them and said, "With human being—this is impossible; but with God all things are possible."

Our scripture calls us to be aware of Christ's invitation to follow him—to be open to taking the next step in our walk of faith.

our scripture calls us to be aware of how our stuff can keep us from following Jesus, can instead, cause us to be the ones who turn our back on him.

Our scripture calls us to intentionally contemplate our priorities of life.

And our scripture admonishes us that we continue to turn our backs on Jesus by putting less important things first.

In a Berlin art gallery is a painting by German painter Adolf Menzel (1815-1905). It's only partially finished, it's intention was to show Fredrick the Great speaking with some of his generals. Menzel painted the generals and the background first, and made an outline of King Fredrick out of charcoal in the center of the painting. However Menzel died prior to finishing.

Many Christians come to end of their lives without ever having put Christ into his proper place, center stage. Karl Laney, Marching Orders, p. 45.

May this Good Word today be the call of Jesus for all of us to turn around and accept his invitation to change ourselves and change the world.