

In the Pursuit of Mythic Success: Interpretation Through the Exegesis of Mark 10:17-22

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Abstract

This essay explores the Biblical principles of leadership succession and development while constructing a Christian ethical response in leading the early Christian communities from insular spirituality to a social or religious force. This investigation provides an extensive understanding of the story of Jesus and the rich, young ruler found in the Gospel of Mark 10:17-22 using social and cultural texture analysis. The results are critical for today's leaders as they increasingly suffer burn-out in search of *mythic success*. From this lens, success is seen as a combination of wealth, power, privilege, and freedom from care. This effort contributes to further exploration into the application of the biblical text to leadership issues, such as succession planning.

Keywords: Leadership, Succession Planning, Mark 10:17-22, Exegesis, Social and Cultural Texture Analysis

Introduction

The young leader had wealth, power, and prestige. Why would he approach a poor Nazareth teacher for help? What does this teacher do to cause this Jewish aristocrat to walk away in shame? This essay explores the Biblical principles of leadership succession and development, while constructing a Christian ethical response. Using exegetical techniques, this investigation provides an extensive understanding of the story of Jesus and the rich, young ruler found in the Gospel of Mark 10:17-22. A man approaches Jesus with an important question, and Jesus provides him with the answer. The man leaves in sorrow because of his material wealth. Through Matthew 19:16-22, it is learned that the man was young while Luke 18:18-23 reveals that this man was a ruler (Mark 10 Commentary - James Burton Coffman Commentaries on the Bible, 2019). This story paints a very odd case for this rich young ruler (RJR). Why in the world would a wealthy, powerful ruler ask such a question to a commoner? From the text, the reader finds that the young man was on a quest. Was he looking for a more meaningful existence or just to latch on to the latest fad?

Many organizations do not approach succession planning biblically and, therefore, lose the benefit of lessons learned. The reality is that most workers are emotionally drained. One-half of workers surveyed in a poll reported that they feel a great deal of stress on the job (Lorenz, 2006). In fact, 68% of workers reported feeling burned out at the office, according to a CareerBuilder.com survey (Lorenz, 2004). Some people will argue that it is the individual's fault for not handling the situation. However, Christina Maslach and Michael Leiter, authors of *The Truth about Burnout*, maintain that burnout is not primarily due to the individual, but the social environment (Maslach, & Leiter, 2004). In fact, John O'Neil argues that chasing after *mythic success* can take a high toll on one's health, relationships, and peace of mind. Mythic success relates to outward achievements, such as power, prestige, and wealth. Ironically, many people are caught up in this vicious cycle that leaves them emotionally drained (O'Neil, 1993). Applying social and cultural texture analysis of Mark 10:17-22 provides an overall impression of the scriptural circumstances through the eyes of the people in the cultural and social setting (Robbins, 1996). The paper examines the fallacies of mythic success by observing the following thoughts: (a) success is absolute and final, (b) success is achieved at all cost, and (c) success will set you free.

Method

In evaluating the sacred text of Mark 10:17-22, social and cultural textual analysis was utilized. Cultural settings can contribute considerably to the understanding of sacred texts. As a result, scholars can discuss explicitly the presuppositions and their consequences operatively in exegesis (DeVillier, 1984). Furthermore, Robbins (1996) argued that socio-rhetorical interpretation has become a multi-dimensional approach to scriptural texts guided by a multidimensional hermeneutics. Through this methodology, this research contributes to understanding today's leadership development in such areas as succession planning. Through a social and cultural analysis, this investigation explores the areas of wealth, power, privilege, and freedom from care.

Jewish Leadership in Jesus' Day

During Jesus' time, the Jewish elites comprised the chief leadership. The rich, young ruler (RYR) was a part of this elite group. The key Jewish leaders were the High Priests, Pharisees, and Sadducees (Wilson, 2007). Although these groups were a part of the aristocratic class, these religious sects were dissimilar in many ways (Huie, 1997). The high priests were very powerful figures who were very interested in maintaining the status quo. In fact, they probably gained financially from the money-changing and sales in the temple. The Pharisees made the greatest impact on the common people because they held great authority over the worship service (Huie, 1997). Consequently, the Pharisees had

much influence on the king or high priest because of their popularity with the people. This influence gave them additional political power so that even the Sadducees complied with Pharisaic requirements because the Sadducees feared the response of the people (Huie, 1997). While the Pharisees had a connection with the common people, the Sadducees were a stark contrast. By the time of Jesus' ministry, Sadducees included families from the high priests as well as other wealthy nobles (Huie, 1997). The Jewish leadership was not perfect. As a matter of fact, the varying backgrounds of these Jewish leaders put them at political odds. In the text of Mark 10:17-22, the rich young ruler was a member of the Pharisee ruling class.

Absolute Success

Many leaders feel that once they achieve their intended success, they will be forever satisfied. As the text turns to the story, the primary focus is the young ruler and Jesus. At this point, a member of the Jewish elite class rushes onto the scene and greets Jesus in platitudes. One thing is for certain; the RYR was sincere because he approaches Jesus, a controversial figure among the Jewish aristocrats. He kneels before Jesus; this is a token of great respect and civility in Jewish culture (Heartlands Search for Gods Words, 2005). Strangely enough, Jesus is not impressed with his RYR's greetings of "Good Master." Jesus responds in Mark 10:18, "... Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God." In evaluating the opening of the text, the researcher discovers two keywords: *good* and *teacher*. The word "good" is a derived Greek word *Agathos* that has several meanings, including "of a good constitution" and "honorable" (Heartlands Search for Gods Words, 2005). Religious scholars cannot be certain what drew this Jewish aristocrat to Jesus. Was it Jesus' fame and the large crowds? Clearly, his peers of Jewish elites did not like Jesus and saw him as a threat to their perceived success. Jesus' popularity with the crowd was not shared by the Jewish elite (Marcus, 1992). In fact, Jesus' viewpoint contradicted the Establishment's views on outward success. Clearly, the RYR viewed Jesus as successful because Jesus had become a respected teacher throughout the county. Being in an elite class and a leader, the young ruler thought he had finally arrived. That paradigm of success changed when he met Jesus.

Today, many leaders are chasing empty success. O'Neil (1993) further outlined what he considered mythic success. Many leaders view success from an outside approach. From this viewpoint, success is seen as a combination of wealth, power, privilege, and freedom from care. However, many times, these external factors are not enough to satisfy individuals. When they realize the emptiness of mythic success, their carnal dreams are dashed. Researchers Hanna Ashar and Maureen Lane-Maher maintain that individuals have

an aspiration for something more out of life (Ashar, & Lane-Maher, 2004).). This process has been commonly called *spirituality*. Today's trends show that individuals are moving toward more spiritual substance. From a leadership theory approach, spiritual formation becomes as important as a leader's outward success. Therefore, leaders who pursue mythic success may only become discontented with their lives like the young, rich ruler.

'At All Cost' Success

Leaders must be willing to count the cost before they pursue their intended success. Although the RYR enjoyed his power and influence, his leadership position could have been a sense of shame because of associations with their pagan oppressors. The Pharisees and Sadducees made up the religious leaders during Jesus' time and were the most influential Jewish group (Huie, 1997). Rome ruled everything and was a dominant political force during this period in almost every facet of Jewish living. This control left a bitter taste in the Jewish people's mouths. Yet, the Establishment was indebted to Roman Rule. Reed (2008) argued that the highest levels of Jewish leadership were loyal to the Roman Empire and feared them (John 11:45-48). In fact, Joseph recorded that the priesthood authorized a daily sacrifice for Caesar's temple (Reed, 2008).

The Pharisees and Sadducees also depended on Roman favor. In fact, the Sadducees thought it was better to get along with the Romans. They opposed Jesus because they feared the people and the Romans. To the RYR, it could have presented a sense of shame. The vast majority of the common Jews did not share the acceptance of Roman rule. Therefore, there was some aspect of shame in supporting the Roman Empire. Shame is a critical factor in Jewish culture. In this social setting, shame refers to a person's sensitivity about what others think, say, and do regarding his or her honor (Robbins, 1996). The RYR met Jesus, despite the opposition from the Jewish Establishment. The Jewish elite did not want to support Jesus and bring the wrath of Rome. This support probably brought the rich young ruler some sense of conflict within himself. He probably carried some internal guilt and shame. However, these feelings were the cost of the RYR's perceived success. He grew up in a highly educated environment of religious law. Why would he risk meeting with a poor teacher about eternal life? The RYR asked Jesus, "What is left for me to do now?" Jesus replied in a concise manner, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me." This response is chilling to the RYR. He must have felt something missing from his life. His actions would suggest that he believed in Jesus' teachings. It is clear, however, that Jesus *loved him*. The RYR could not imagine the heavy requirements placed on him to become a disciple; however, Jesus' own disciples had left their families, fortunes,

and a predictable lifestyle to follow Jesus. Jesus expects the same commitment from this young man. The young aristocrat placed his earthly riches ahead of “treasures in heaven.” The RYR failed to count the cost. In fact, he walked away sorrowful, which placed a heavy burden on his heart. Likewise, today’s leaders should count the cost of any decision. In the early parts of leadership theory, personality theorists suggested that leadership was a one-way street in which leaders were at the center point of organizations (Bass, 1999). However, they failed to understand that the personal qualities of a leader determine his or her acceptability among followers. Consequently, leaders who do not evaluate their decisions and the outcomes undermine the representation and trust among their followers.

Care-Free Success

Many leaders feel that success will set them free from a dreary existence. The wealthy elite of Jesus’ time had few physical needs. In fact, many religious leaders felt they lacked nothing spiritually or physically. Therefore, they lived a carefree life. In Mark 10:17-22, readers see an impulsive and humble young man who kneels before Jesus’ feet in the daylight. In the quest for success, the RYR appears to be self-absorbed with himself because he uses first-person pronouns, like *me* and *I*, frequently in the text. The young aristocrat finds assurance in living the proper aristocratic lifestyle by showcasing to Jesus all the *do not’s* that he has followed according to his Jewish traditions. However, the RYR demonstrates a few *do’s* in the specific text. He had mastered what he perceived to be a good Jewish leader. Therefore, he was freed from the plight of the common man. Yet, in approaching Jesus, the young leader demonstrated that he was not free from his consciousness. In Matthew 19:20, he said to Jesus, “What do I still lack?” Despite the differences between these wealthy Jewish classes, they were both in opposition to Jesus’ ministry and became allies in this regard. However, the RYR realized that Jesus provided something different for him. Therefore, the RYR’s search for a carefree existence had not been achieved.

Today’s leaders do not want to conduct genuine introspection in their lives. In fact, many leaders do not want to deal with their personal issues. From a leadership concept, Leadership expert Peter Northouse argues that self-confidence helps a leader to be sure about his competencies and abilities (Northouse, 2004). Yet, self-confidence does not mean that a leader is blind to his shortcomings. In fact, O’Neil (1993) suggested that many people feel trapped by circumstances that are supposed to liberate them. Unfortunately, living a carefree life without dealing with personal issues can increase stress on and from the job. In fact, good leaders must be willing to take a true self-evaluation of themselves to be effective (Miller, 1995). Just as the RYR lacked the insight to understand the fallacies of a

carefree life, today's leaders must be willing to conduct these personal assessments. Therefore, thriving leaders understand that mythic success does not translate to carefree living.

Conclusion

As many leaders begin to retire, organizations are growing more concerned about succession planning. Organizations cannot afford to misfire when strategizing tomorrow's workforce. Due to the pressures of life, many workers are rethinking what success means to them. Today, success is seen as a combination of wealth, power, privilege, and freedom from care. In today's high pace, business climate, employees at all levels are stressed out, insecure, misunderstood, undervalued, and alienated in America's workplaces (Maslach, & Leiter, 1997). Jesus can provide today's leaders a model for the spiritual formation and demonstrate the fallacies of mythic success. In today's contemporary organizations, many executives fail to understand this reality. Therefore, they can damage the hopes of developing an effective succession planning process. This investigation provides an extensive understanding of the story of Jesus and the rich, young ruler found in the Gospel of Mark 10:17-22 using social and cultural texture analysis. In rushing to see Jesus, the RYR demonstrates a lack of maturity based on two factors: a) his impulsive nature to act, and b) his inability to accept wise counsel from Jesus. The results of this story are critical for today's leaders as they increasingly suffer burn-out in search of mythic success. This effort contributes to further exploration into the application of the biblical text to leadership issues, such as succession planning.¹

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