Is there anything more beautiful, rare, or invigorating to an organization than to have someone volunteer their service? And even more so if that volunteer is rich in resources and influence, and eager in their enthusiasm to join the cause! Just ask any leader in a political organization, non-profit, or church, and they will quickly tell you how much energy they spend trying to recruit such supporters, and how their success is dependent upon the giftedness and passion of their volunteer base. It is the difference between winning or losing the White House, raising the needed capital to finance a dream, or helping that organization fulfill its mission and vision in the world. Volunteers are the life-blood of the cause. Without them, even the most important movement ceases to move forward at all, …it grinds to a halt.

So imagine the elation among the band of Jesus disciples when this would-be volunteer came up to Jesus, offering to join their ranks. Saint Mark tells us that the man was rich. When Saint Matthew tells this story, he tells us the man was also young. Saint Luke’s version of the story tells us the man was a ruler. Imagine that, a volunteer who is young, rich, and with powerful connections! It must have felt incredible to the stunned disciples. Surely they assumed this rich young man could be a game-changer for the movement, providing a much-needed boost to their talent pool, their budget, and their networking. And on top of all that wealth, when questioned by Jesus about some of the Ten Commandments, this star volunteer also proved to be a moral law-abiding man of faith. He seemed to be the perfect volunteer, the answer to any recruiter’s prayer.

Who could ever refuse such a stellar volunteer.
No one, except Jesus. For Jesus sees this man as he sees us all, and knows us all, from the inside out, not just the outside in. Armed with that divine insight into this young man’s soul, Jesus is able to resist being taken in by the resume, great accomplishments, and the lure of his apparent potential for the disciple band. In just a brief conversation with the young man, Jesus uncovers and reveals the disqualifying flaws under this man’s ideal surface. No wonder the disciples were astonished when this apparently perfect volunteer was turned away by Jesus. Like them, we find ourselves wondering, “Who then can be saved?” In other words, if this guy couldn’t make it into the Kingdom, who can? If the young, the beautiful, the talented, the wealthy, and the moral aren’t good enough, what chance do the rest of us ordinary folk have?

Of course, there is nothing wrong with being young, rich, influential. Those qualities are not disqualifiers for the Kingdom. And Those qualities can be of great value for God. But this story is telling us that those wonderful attributes, so prized by our culture, are also not automatic trump cards either. God judges by different criteria than the world does. This young man was not refused because he was rich or powerful or moral. His cause for disqualification was a deeper issue, one common to people at all socio-economic levels and all ages. So what was it? What can we who would follow Jesus learn from this story?

We learn from this encounter that we must not place our ultimate trust in the assets of our portfolio, the strength of our network, or the youthful strength of our bodies. Our ultimate loyalty can only be placed in God Himself. The risk of great wealth, or beauty, or power, is that we are tempted to believe those qualities belong to us, that they make us special compared to other people, or that they will last forever. Actually, as wonderful as these things are, they are all temporary. Deep down we all know this, which is why we go to such ridiculous lengths to secure
our wealth, or artificially extend the appearance of our youth. But no matter our efforts, in the end it all disappears. To build one’s solid hope on such a sandy foundation is an exercise in futility destined for disappointment. Jesus wanted this young man to realize that all of his wealth was merely on loan to him from God, the Generous Provider of every gift. It was not his to control, to hoard, or to own. It never occurred to this young man that his wealth had come to him, on its way through him, to a world in need. His great joy could have been to be steward of those resources, to see the poor as a neighbor on equal footing in the sight of God, and to join God in the utter delight of guiding abundance to the places where it will make the greatest difference. Instead, this man’s possessions possessed him. He just could not loosen his fisted grip on the things that he thought set him apart, the things that secured his future, the portfolio that established his status in the world.

It is worth observing here that by challenging him to give away all of his wealth to the poor, Jesus was calling out this young wealthy man at the point of his particular weakness. There are many others who had wealth, whose encounters with Jesus are told in the Gospels who were already generous with their resources, and to whom Jesus did not ask for a total emptying of their accounts as a condition of discipleship. Why not demand that they liquidate their entire portfolio before following Jesus? The difference must have been the way these wealthy persons related to their money. If a wealthy person can learn to hold abundance with an open palm, a generous heart, and a grateful spirit, God may use such a person as a continuous pipeline of His transforming generosity. The danger to discipleship is when the open palm curls into a fist, the grateful spirit shrinks into a sense of entitlement, and the generous heart hardens against the neighbor in need. No amount of commandments kept will make up for the misuse of God’s abundant gifts meant to be shared with the world, but hoarded only for selfish purposes.
This young man was *so close*, and yet *so far*, from the Kingdom. He kept the commandments that prohibited violence, adultery, stealing, lying, cheating. His spiritual resume was strong when it came to the bad things he did NOT do to his neighbor. But his weakness, the Achilles heel to his usefulness for God, was for his failure to do the good things he COULD do for his neighbor. He was disqualified for the good and loving things he could have done, and would not. So he became just another camel left staring hopelessly at the eye of needle, an impossibly small space a generous God could squeeze him through, if he would only allow it.