

Pastor's Message – 10/13/24  
Mark 10:17-31

So in our Bible reading today, Mark tells us that a man runs up to Jesus and kneels before him, asking him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 17). Although Mark does not reveal his age, Matthew, who tells a similar story, says that he is a "young man" (19:20). We might call him a Millennial or Gen Z, a person today in their 20s or early 30s.

Even though many Bibles tag this story as "The Rich Man," Mark does not actually mention the man's economic status until the end of the encounter. However, through either intuition or the man's dress and demeanor, Jesus seems to have discerned that the man was well-off. Apparently familiar with who Jesus was, the rich man had only one agenda for the meeting: "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?"

The rich young man has come to Jesus, searching for the means to obtain eternal life. In the eyes of some in the world, he already possesses all he needs. He has knowledge of the Law and its requirements and enough wealth to fulfill them. The man's possessions enabled him to keep the Law as faithfully as he did.

You have to understand that within the Hebrew tradition, wealthy people were the ones who could spend time reading the Bible and praying. In Old Testament times, there was a widespread assumption that wealth was the sign of God's favor. It's not so different today. We may feel we are blest because of what we have, whether wealth or possessions or good health or a successful career or the ability to take vacations or trips or . . .

The rich young man comes to Jesus for spiritual counseling and Jesus reminds him of the requirements of the commandments and proceeds to tick off a few of them. Well, for this man, there is no problem with that. We learn that not only does he enjoy great affluence, but he also knows and has observed all the commandments and tenets of the Jewish faith. In other words, he is rich *and* righteous. Wow! Imagine that! And he tells Jesus this quite plainly.

The young man says that he has, since his youth, followed the commandments: He hasn't committed murder, he wasn't a thief, he didn't lie or cheat, and he honored his parents. In short, his life seems to be in perfect order. He's a good and righteous man. He has worked hard and kept the faith. Why, the fact that he is wealthy is confirmation that he is a good man! There should be no question about it. As a good and faithful Jew, he surely deserves to enjoy the eternal life Jesus promises.

He thinks *not only* is Jesus good, but that *he, too*, is good. And by good, he means that he has followed the commandments. He has checked off all the right boxes and earned for himself this elusive inheritance known as eternal life. Eternal life should be his because he is a good and righteous man.

Now I think we can understand this, because, I think, sometimes, we think the same way. We may say we believe we are saved by God's grace; but then, in the next breath, we

start making a list of what we believe will enable us to be called good in the eyes of God when we stand before the throne of judgment.

When the man finishes his testimony about his own worthiness, Mark tells us that Jesus, looking at him, *loved* him. It was only after this that Jesus proceeded to tell him he needed to go and sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. After he does this, Jesus says, he will have treasures in heaven and can come and follow him.

So what is it about being harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle? Why is Jesus so tough on the rich? Why is it harder to enter God's kingdom if you are rich? After all, "Greed is good." What's wrong with bettering our situation?

I grew up believing, and perhaps you did too, that there was a gate into the city which was inaccessible to camels: too short. The story goes that at night, all the gates of a city were closed and locked except for one gate – a gate that a man had to stoop to enter. It was too short for a camel to enter unless, maybe, it was unloaded of all its baggage first.

In later years, I've learned that that story, an urban myth, has been told so often that it has become true. It may or may not be a true story, but I think it is a good image for us to hold onto: an image for us to consider as we reflect on our desire and longing for salvation and eternal life. We can all picture in our mind's eye a camel stooping down to its knees to get through a short gate: an eye of a needle. We might even be able to imagine trying to put a camel through the eye of an actual needle.

When we think about Jesus' teachings, parables, sermons and prayers, we hazily assume that Jesus spent most of his time talking about God and love and salvation. Not! The two subjects that Jesus focused on the most often? 1) The kingdom of God and 2) Money.

When we consider the story of the rich young man, it's not too much of a stretch to see that we are the rich man, and he is us. At some point, friends and followers of Jesus are faced with the same challenge as the rich man and many make the same choice.

How would you respond if called upon to give up your material possessions? You'd balk, as any of us would - and for good reason. After all, is it wrong to have money to feed and shelter our families, to put our children or grandchildren through college, to pay our tithes and offerings to the church? Don't think so. Having resources doesn't necessarily mean that our possessions are our masters or that we suffer from a consumerist addiction affliction.

So it's hard to pinpoint money as a necessarily dangerous addictive substance. But if it isn't money, what is it? Clearly, there's something here that has the rich man hooked.

In this case, Jesus finds the hot button. The call is clear: Give up what defines your life, and follow me. In this case, it clearly was the man's toys and playthings, the possessions he had managed to accumulate. Jesus challenges the man to make an exchange: drop what limits him in exchange for what frees him - opens him up to a wider and more meaningful life.

I have learned, especially in the moves I have made that I have too much stuff. Too much stuff to move, too much stuff to take care of, too much stuff that causes me to need a certain amount of money, too much stuff that costs too much. Too much stuff that suggests to me that my stuff starts to own me instead of the other way around. I hear many people say how difficult it is to downsize when moving from a larger house to a smaller house and so we hang onto stuff and have to rent storage lockers or build a bigger garage just to hold the stuff. Like the rich young man whose wealth possessed him, we can run the same risk.

Today's reading is one of the hardest sayings of Jesus for (mostly) middle and upper middle class congregations. We are generally a powerful, well-resourced, can-do people. We tend to think we can do whatever we set our minds to.

Jesus disagrees.

You can't deliver yourself from your wealth, he reminds.

And unless you are delivered from that, you'll always be on the outside of God's kingdom looking in, if that.

That is unless we follow the direction of Jesus or John Wesley who said, "Earn as much as you can, save as much as you can, give as much as you can. We may gain much, but the purpose of gaining much is to be able to give much.

This young man had already gained all he could need for a lifetime.

It was time to give it all away if he were going to find life and not just respectability in synagogue and society.

The question is not whether. It is when.

For this young man, the when was now.

The when will come for each of us if it hasn't yet.

If we search our hearts, we know that we have not kept all the commandments. We know that we can't keep all the commandments. All fall short of the glory of God, Paul says, and there is not one who is righteous. We *should* be good people. We should love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and strengths and minds. We should follow Jesus and try to live according to his teachings as best we can.

Jesus looked at [the young man] carefully and loved him. Jesus loves us as we are. In other words, Jesus knows that if we have to be good to inherit eternal life, then surely none of us would make it. God alone is good. Salvation through Jesus Christ isn't about being good. It is about hearing the good news.

You may ask the question with the rich young man, "Good Teacher, what must I do to obtain eternal life?" Am I acceptable in God's eyes? Have I obtained salvation? Am I good enough to get to heaven?

Our good works, nothing we can do, can earn salvation. Our good works are a response to God's offer of grace. Our good works cannot erase sin: past, present or future.

We won't set ourselves free.

Won't happen.

Impossible.

But God can.

Will we let go enough to let God?

The good news is that we have salvation not because we are good. Our salvation is through Christ. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what restores our relationship with God.

The good news is that because of Jesus Christ, God has offered all of us grace and mercy, no matter who we are or what we have done.

The good news is that God doesn't reward the righteous with riches, nor does God punish the unrighteous with poverty and disease and suffering.

The good news is that we are saved not by what we do, but by the grace of God shown in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We cannot obtain eternal life without a relationship with Jesus Christ and a relationship with God is impossible when other relationships take precedence. Jesus requires that we trust in him and not in our possessions. Jesus requires that we put Him first. If you've never trusted Jesus as your Savior, there is something between you and God – could be your possessions, could be your hobbies or leisure pursuits, could be your habits or relationships, could be whatever you put most of your time, money, and energy in. Those things are the eye of the needle and you are the camel.

In our quest for comfortable Christianity, too many are happy with cheap grace - a discipleship which costs us precisely nothing. Christianity isn't about feeling good about ourselves; it isn't about having our little psychological misalignments adjusted. These things are there, but we have mistaken what should be a side effect with the thing itself.

We are supposed to be full and running over, free of concern about our material goods, ready, pleased even, to lay them down. But we can be too involved in our little spiritual games, where we say that we don't care about our possessions, nodding wisely when Paul says they are "garbage." We may even think we mean it. But how many of us give up even a few of our pleasures because the money we would have spent on it we have given away?

Jesus looks at us and loves us and invites us into a relationship of love where He can shower grace upon us, filled to the brim, shaken down and overflowing. Jesus looks at us and loves us and calls to lay down all those things that get in the way of a relationship with Him, a relationship that is characterized by the same sacrifice He has made for us. Jesus looks at us and loves us and offers healing for our very souls.

You are so close, not because of what you have done, but because of the life-giving, life-saving love of God. You are so close to the Kingdom, close enough to see it, close enough to touch it, close enough to obtain salvation by accepting the gift of forgiveness and love that God offers. Impossible? Surrendering all things to God. Putting our whole life in Jesus hands, "All things are possible for God."