

## Scripture Reading for Sunday Oct 14<sup>th</sup> 2018

### Mark 10:17-31

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup> “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’” <sup>20</sup> “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” <sup>21</sup> Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup> The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup> The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” <sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

<sup>28</sup> Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!” <sup>29</sup> “Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel <sup>30</sup> will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

## Sermon: “Wealth and the Kingdom of God”

One of the things about Mark’s gospel is the intensity of its events and conversations and the breakneck speed of the narrative. That is captured vividly in today’s story by the man *running* to Jesus and falling on his knees in front of him as Jesus is *walking* to Jerusalem. But freeze the frame of this movie for just a moment because we need to remember what Mark has previously told us. Jesus has said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.”<sup>1</sup> Recall that children had no rights or social standing, as I mentioned last week. They were utterly dependent upon their father, who could easily disown them. Entry in to kingdom of God is, therefore, *utterly dependent upon God’s generosity* – rather than based on our merit, or by legal right, or by a sense of personal entitlement.

With that in mind, we can continue: the man asks Jesus, “Good teacher, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” Again, let’s pause. When we hear the words “eternal life” we are conditioned to think that means “life after death” so we interpret the question as meaning “What must I do to be sure I’m going to heaven?” However, Jews at that time divided time into two ages: the “present age” and “the age to come”; consequently, the question could be worded, “What must I do to enter the age to come when God rules supreme?”<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the man’s question has a future-world element to it, not least because of his curious use of the word “inherit,” and even that word has a sense of entitlement to it.<sup>3</sup> We can, however, *inherit* things in the here and now, we ourselves don’t have to die. Consequently, we could legitimately reword the question as, “What must I do to attain life, *both* in the present age and in the age to come?” Or put another way, “What must I do to enter the kingdom of God?”

Mark’s readers, including you and me, already know the answer. To enter the kingdom of God *we must come as a child*. In fact, we cannot **do** anything! That was the point of the previous section; we must come as a child with no rights relying on God’s grace *not* on our effort, thinking that we are entitled to enter the kingdom by our good works, moral behavior, and upright character. Armed with that insight, let us see how the drama unfolds.

Jesus responds to the question in a way any Rabbi would and reminds the man of the Mosaic Law: “You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud;<sup>4</sup> Honor your father and mother.’”<sup>5</sup> Notice which commandments are mentioned, and which ones are missing. Other than respecting your parents, these

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 10:15. See also Luke 18:17.

<sup>2</sup> In Mark’s gospel, Jesus speaks of “the kingdom of God being at hand” (Mark 1:15) and later, in post-resurrection thinking, Mark’s audience would understand the kingdom of God to have *already* begun. The “age to come” certainly happens in the future when heaven and earth are one, and when God lives among his people (as it says in Rev 21-22; see Rev 21:3), but the kind of bodies we will have will be *resurrection* bodies, rather than disembodied spirits. Such theological reflection/analysis is not explicit within Mark.

<sup>3</sup> There is also a tension between “doing” and “inheritance”; by definition, an inheritance is something a person can only be *given*! Perhaps the word “inherit” is one that comes naturally to the lips of a man of wealth. (See Mark 10:22.)

<sup>4</sup> The command to “do not deprive (defraud) others (especially the poor and hired help)” echoes Malachi 3:5 and Sirach 4:1.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 10:19; see also Exod 20:1-17. (And then any good Rabbi would say, “Join our group”!)

are the negative *social* commandments – or the list of “don’ts.” Incidentally, the odd sounding one “don’t defraud” or cheat others what they are due comes from the prophet Malachi.<sup>6</sup> What is missing is “don’t covet,” and all the other commandments that *pertain to God*<sup>7</sup> and keeping the Sabbath. Adhering to that list of social “don’ts” is basically what you do to be a *respectable* person. If you don’t those things, you are deemed to be a decent neighbour and you won’t have the police at your door!

The sincere man responds by saying that he has kept all these commands since he was a boy. Jesus does not reprimand him for lying or exaggerating; instead, we are told that Jesus looked at him and *loved* him. Jesus saw something authentic in him because he invited him to become the 13<sup>th</sup> disciple. Here are the well-known words Jesus said: “One thing you lack, go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.<sup>8</sup> Then come, follow me.”<sup>9</sup>

The man asked Jesus what he “*must do*,” so Jesus gives him something more *to do*! Jesus says: “Go, sell, give, come, and follow.” There is a contrast here between these five action verbs and the earlier list of “don’ts” that, by and large, are all about respectability. It is as if the man says to Jesus, “I have *never* done anyone any harm in my life.” But the real question is, “What *good* have you done?” Jesus confronts the man by saying that “goodness” is much more than *not* doing certain things.

Now Doug, our treasurer, is having a minor heart attack at the moment; Jesus is giving the worst financial advice he has ever heard! “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor” is a terrifying message to receive, both then and now.<sup>10</sup> Yet this radical call to divest himself of all his property also correlates with becoming like a child, in that it requires setting aside everything that confers status and power over others. Doug would probably rather hear of a prudently-planned and carefully-managed giving scheme, extended over a period of time, including some post-death bequests! In practice, that might be a good strategy to achieve that end, but what this shows is that actively following Jesus is *not* simply “business as usual.” At the heart of that matter, Jesus is highlighting the basic need for a *generous spirit*. This week, in our study in Acts 4, we read about the generosity of certain members within the early church, such as Barnabas, and their attitude to possessions and caring for those in need as they began to live out in practice the reality of the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> What about this man’s response to the call of Jesus to “Go, sell, give, come, and follow”? We are told looked sad and he went away sorrowful, for he was *very rich*. It is only at the *end* of this encounter does Mark reveals the man has great wealth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Later, in Mark 10:22, we discover the man was rich; this command has special relevance in that context.

<sup>7</sup> Like: putting God first, no worshipping of idols, and not taking the Lord’s name in vain (i.e., dishonouring God).

<sup>8</sup> N T Wright says: “When Jesus says “you will have treasure in heaven,” he doesn’t mean that the young man must go to “heaven” in order to get it. He means God will keep it stored up for him until the time when, in the age to come, all is revealed. The reason you have money in the bank is *not* so that you can spend it in the bank! The reason many have treasure in heaven - God’s storehouse – is so it can be enjoyed in the age to come when God brings heaven and earth together.”

<sup>9</sup> Mark 10:21.

<sup>10</sup> See also Mark 8:36; 12:43-44; Luke 12:33; 14:33; 18:22; Matt 19:21; 1 Tim 6:17-19; 2 Cor 9:7; 1Cor 13:3.

<sup>11</sup> See Acts 4:32-37. Luke’s theological point was this community was living in the spirit of Jubilee (see Lev 25).

<sup>12</sup> Matthew also tells us he was *young* (Matt 19:22) and Luke describes him as a *ruler* (or an aristocrat; Luke 18:18).

Having wealth in itself is not the problem; but having money can do strange things to people. And Mark's reader's have already been primed to recognise this possibility because earlier in the Parable of the Sower, we read: "Other [seed] are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but *the cares of the world*, and *the lure of wealth*, and *the desire for other things* come in and choke the word, and it yields *nothing*."<sup>13</sup> Note that Jesus does not condemn the rich man, but confronts him with his weakness; his captivity to possessions prevent him from living in the full light of the kingdom.<sup>14</sup> There is a power here that holds the man in bondage and the Jesus invites the man to step into freedom by letting go; but the man cannot. While it is true that the man had never stolen or defrauded anyone, perhaps he had never been *sacrificially* generous. Or put another way: while he had kept that list of social "don't" commands, he had "not loved his neighbor as himself."<sup>15</sup> He simply had not thought of entering the kingdom of God or receiving life in the age to come in those terms.

Ministers and scholars, faced with this command to "sell everything you have and give to the poor," have tried various schemes to soften or avoid this "hard saying" of Jesus. Here are two such proposals:<sup>16</sup> First, Jesus' statement was meant only for this particular individual, and not a general requirement for discipleship, and so we are let of the hook and can breathe a sigh of relief! Second, the command is not meant literally, we say, but spiritually, for it is not having money, but *loving* it that creates the problem.<sup>17</sup> Both of these interpretations try to make Jesus is teaching reasonable, and so eliminating its' disturbing demand. I suggest however, our love of money and material things means we try to rephrase the basic question as, "How *much* does Jesus want?" And that is *not* the right question; you can't quantify it like that. Jesus says, "I want *you*, *all of you*; come and follow me!"

As is typical of Mark, the story then shifts to Jesus' conversation with the disciples on the same theme. Jesus himself generalises his comment: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" and Mark writes that the disciples were *astonished* at his words.<sup>18</sup> It is worth considering why they would be so perplexed by Christ's words. Their amazement indicates that they shared the general Old Testament view that regarded wealth as a *blessing* from God, a sign of divine favour.<sup>19</sup> People naturally assumed that the wealthy elite were *closer* to God and more likely to be saved than were common people. It is also worth saying in passing that this Old Testament thinking is the basis of the popular "prosperity gospel" that is a feature of some churches, especially in the US. "Follow Jesus and you will get rich," they say, and the introduction fee is 10% to the preacher! Evidently such theology has ignored

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 4:18-19.

<sup>14</sup> See also Mark 8:36. Even billionaire philanthropists, regardless of their motives, are warming to the concept of giving!

<sup>15</sup> Mark 12:31.

<sup>16</sup> Here are two more: (a) Perhaps the man had sincerely kept all the Jewish law and therefore felt he no need of God's grace through which alone salvation is possible. Jesus thus intensified the demand, attempting to bring the man to an awareness that he could not be saved – or enter the kingdom - by his own accomplishments. (Protestants love that one!) (b) Some seek a qualification in the other synoptic gospels. In Matt 19:21 there's a preface: "If you wish to be perfect. . ." might this open the door to two-tier discipleship?! (No!)

<sup>17</sup> In 1 Tim 6:10 we read, "The *love* of money is the root of all evil."

<sup>18</sup> Mark 10:23-24.

<sup>19</sup> See Deut 28:1–14; Job 1:10; 42:10; Prov 10:22. Indeed, in the wider Greco-Roman world, material property was widely seen as a reward or a by-product of spiritual virtue, as well as in the Jewish faith.

this teaching of Jesus and is a travesty of the gospel message! The measure of God's "blessing" is *not* to be quantified in dollars, or equated to the size of congregations for that matter. Jesus turns that whole way of thinking upside down and the disciples are stunned.

Jesus repeats his radical comment: "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."<sup>20</sup> I remember at Sunday School being taught that the "Needle's Eye" referred to a small gate in the wall surrounding Jerusalem and that camels had to be completely unloaded before trying to squeeze through the entrance-way on their knees. However cute the image, there was no such gate in Jerusalem and this story first appeared in a ninth-century commentary on this passage! Again, here is another rationalization to soften the force of the passage. It provides a possible route into the kingdom, on our knees and without the baggage of possessions. While that may be consistent with what Jesus asked the rich man to do – sell everything and give to the poor – it is *not* the meaning of the camel and the eye of the needle adage. No, this is a proverbial saying that shows the *sheer impossibility* of the action.<sup>21</sup> And the disciples were flabbergasted."<sup>22</sup> Mark often portrays the disciples as slow learners, but here – for once – they understand. "Who then can be saved?" they ask, or "Who then can enter the kingdom?"<sup>23</sup> And Jesus replies: "This is impossible for mere humans, but not for God; all things are possible for God."<sup>24</sup> The miracles Mark related earlier demonstrate that God is powerfully at work in Jesus the Messiah, making the seemingly impossible possible. Consequently, God *can* save the rich, God can save anyone! But this proverb expresses again the fact that entry into the kingdom is made possible only because of God's gracious initiative. There are things we can and should *do* once we are a part of God's kingdom, but we *can't earn entry* by those things and actions the world considers meritorious. Access to the age to come requires relinquishing control over this life's treasures and following a new master.

What are we to make of all this today? First, how *we* respond to the incident differs depending upon *our* socioeconomic status. Some who live simply with meagre belonging have a crippling sense guilt when they hear these words of Jesus to sell everything. I believe that guilt is misplaced because without doubt Jesus was using the language of hyperbole to drive his point home. Having said that, there is no harder saying of Jesus than this one for us Westerners to hear today, at it carries with it a great temptation to water it down in order to tame Jesus. We are born into privilege and affluence, and it is so easy for us to get caught up in consumerism and the rat race. In so doing, our pursuit of wealth can hold us in bondage to systemic, economic powers that are tainted, even evil, because we get richer at the expense of the global poor. And to some extent we are *all* complicit in that we all depend on

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<sup>20</sup> Mark 10:24-25.

<sup>21</sup> In Jewish rabbinical literature, 'an elephant passing through the eye of the needle' was a figure of speech for sheer impossibility. Another variant is to note the Greek for "camel" and a ship's mooring "cable" (or rope) are very similar. To again rationalise the saying of Jesus, some have suggested this was a scribal copyist's error!

<sup>22</sup> Mark 10:26.

<sup>23</sup> Mark 10:26.

<sup>24</sup> Mark 10:27. Nevertheless, the "all things are possible for God" is expressed here in the *context of salvation* itself (entry into the kingdom). It does not mean every miracle we ask for in prayer is therefore possible or likely. This important, complex pastoral and theological theme is explored in Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?*

investments and we haven't a clue as to the ethics of how our retirement savings accumulate. Moreover, material possessions tend to fix our hearts on *this* world. And our interest in material possessions tends to make us think of everything in terms of price; we speak of knowing "the price of everything and the value of nothing." Money, then, can become an idol we worship, inadvertently perhaps, instead of trusting in God. Certainly, those who pride themselves on their possessions and expect material property to provide them with ultimate security are sadly mistaken. And as we all know, "We can't take it with us when we die!" Nor can wealth keep us – or our loved ones – from dying.

What are we then to do about our money? Jesus does not leave us with an easy response. We have to work that out ourselves with the help of the Holy Spirit. We call always point to various bodies, including Churches, that could and should be doing more; but that must not be an excuse for *our* own response. There is much we cannot control, but we can all begin by examining *our own* generosity of Spirit. My experience from Africa taught me that often is the poorest people who are the most generous. All Christians should think seriously about their stewardship of money and material possessions. Many find it difficult to resist the pressures of the consumer culture, which generates the actual needs for more and newer possessions. But we must resist, not least because our excess consumption may deprive others of resources that they need just to survive.<sup>25</sup>

Having wealth is a test of character and of responsibility as to how we use it.<sup>26</sup> Recall again the Parable of the Sower; those who were unproductive in response to the gospel message were so because *the lure of wealth*, and *the desire for other things* choked off their good intentions.<sup>27</sup> Will we use *our* wealth unselfishly, both individually<sup>28</sup> and as a church? Will we use it to generously to serve our neighbour? That is Christ's call for us. Will we respond by following Jesus? Or will we too walk away from the untameable Life-giver, sad because we too have many possessions? I hope not. Let us pray.

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<sup>25</sup> This is a (not so) hidden form of structural greed that often wastes the world's resources and increases the suffering of others in regions of the global village we will never see. (Unless we watch a documentary revealing their plight.)

<sup>26</sup> See the Parable of the Talents in Matt 25:14-30.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 4:18-19.

<sup>28</sup> Married couples need to *agree* on this issue; hence this is an important conversation to have – *listen* to each other!