

The Rich Young Man

Last week we started talking about Job with the kids – his story is spread across four weeks of the lectionary cycle. We also started reading from Mark 10 about Jesus' teachings, and we'll stay in chapter 10 today and for the next two weeks. In last week's Gospel lesson we heard Jesus' teachings about divorce and about children. His views on those topics were as counter-cultural then as they are now. In today's Gospel lesson, what Jesus teaches also goes against the grain with what we might consider common sense regarding wealth and possessions. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Mark 10:17-31. **Read Mark 10:17-31.**

In Luke's Gospel account, this particular fellow who interacts with Jesus is referred to as a "ruler," which is how we get what we usually call the guy by – "the rich young ruler." After Jesus corrects the disciples about not letting the children come to Him, we hear of this young man who runs up to Him and falls on his knees. By doing this, the young man is showing respect to Jesus. He's showing a genuine interest in spiritual matters. He's probably heard about Jesus – maybe he's even asked a similar question to other teachers of the law before and wants to see what Jesus will say now.

He asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). His question about eternal life is sincere. He genuinely wants to receive it. Jesus responds, first with a question, and then a response which I suppose sounded a lot like what the Pharisees and the Sadducees would have said. "Why do you call Me good? No one is good – except God alone. 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,'" (verses 18-19).

Wealth as a Blessing

The young man confidently states, "Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy," (verse 20). On the surface, he's the model of moral uprightness. He's not just rich – he's also responsible, diligent, and respectful of God's law. Today we might call him a "seeker." He seems to have everything all figured out, except for that one thing – which he asks Jesus about – eternal life.

In those days – and maybe in some sectors yet today – people thought that wealth was a blessing God gave to people who were upstanding, model citizens of God's kingdom. Sometimes it can be, but we know that's not always the case. We'll talk about three in particular a bit later who weren't necessarily role model citizens. Historically, there have been a lot of people who came into wealth simply by the accident of being born into a wealthy family. In this particular man's case, Jesus sees beyond the external, and recognizes the one thing which holds the man back. The

young man's attachment to wealth – specifically possessions – has created a barrier between him and God.

Jesus Loved Him

Notice how verse 21 opens. “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” This is key to understanding this passage specifically, but also the Gospel, in general. There has never been – there will never be – a human being born into existence which is not looked at and loved by Almighty God. There are a lot of people in the world that we look down our noses at. We don't love them.

We get in this mindset that says, “there are limits to what is available,” and so we treat others as “less than.” The idea of scarcity is very real in the world – but it doesn't jive with what Scriptures teach us about God's kingdom – a kingdom abundance, with plenty of resources for all people. So, we fall short when we take the worldly mindset and say, “there's enough for me, but not for you.” There are a lot of people who fall short – we all do – “but God proves His love for us like this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Rom. 5:8).

“‘One thing you lack,’ Jesus said. ‘Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me,’” (Mark 10:21). This is the heart of the challenge – letting go of the security and status that possessions and wealth provide. It's important for us to recognize here, that Jesus isn't condemning wealth in itself. He is exposing the man's dependence on it.

Wealth had become his identity, his comfort, and his assurance. For the young man, following Jesus meant letting go of that security, which was too high of a price for him to pay. “At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth,” (verse 22), Mark records. Can you imagine? If he could have parted with his possessions, he may have become one of the apostles and we we may have read a passage from his book this morning.

Modern-Day Examples

Many throughout history have found themselves in a similar dilemma, facing the challenge of giving up their wealth for something greater, but struggling to do so. Howard Hughes was one of the wealthiest men in the world in the 1900's, known for his ventures in aviation, film, and business. Despite his immense wealth, Hughes lived a life of increasing isolation and paranoia. His riches couldn't buy him peace of mind or contentment. He became so obsessed with protecting his wealth and controlling every aspect of his life that it led to his mental and physical decline. Hughes – like the rich young man in our passage – couldn't let go of his wealth, and instead, it ended up controlling him.

Hetty Green is another example of this. Each year I read a passage with my students about her. She was known as the “Witch of Wall Street,” and was one of the richest women in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Each week she would go to the bank – and spend a day counting every cent in her bank account. Sounds like a ritual – we might call worship – doesn’t it?

Despite her vast fortune, she was notorious for being a tightwad. Hetty lived in a cheap apartment, and refused to pay for medical care for her son, Ned, resulting in one of his legs not healing correctly and needing to be amputated. Her obsession with wealth left her disconnected from basic human needs and relationships. In her pursuit to hold onto every cent, she sacrificed the well-being of her own family. Hetty Green, like the rich young man, was unable to release her grip on wealth for the sake of something more important.

One final example for us to think about this morning is Andrew Carnegie. He was one of the richest men in American history. Carnegie is often celebrated for giving away nearly 90% of his wealth to charities and educational institutions. But his fortune was built on the backs of exploited workers – he was big in the steel and railroad industries – and his charitable works came about only later in life after realizing the limitations of his riches. He had a change of heart – which is a good thing – when he realized that he couldn’t buy world peace. Though he gave much of his fortune away, his early years reflect the same struggle of holding onto wealth at the cost of others’ well-being.

Camels and Needles

In all three examples – Howard Hughes, Hetty Green, and Andrew Carnegie – we see how wealth and possessions, when held too tightly, can prevent people from living out their greater purpose. They also show us that even those who attempt to give their wealth and possessions away may face the consequences of how they obtained or managed it. After the young man walks away, sorrowful because of his great wealth, Jesus turns to His disciples and says, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (verse 23). The disciples are shocked, and Jesus says it again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” (verse 24).

He goes on. “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,” (verse 25). We hear this, and often picture a large camel trying to fit into the eye of a little metal needle with which someone tries to sew a button back onto a pair of pants or a shirt. That’s a pretty good image – though not the one Jesus intended us to have when He first said this to His disciples.

In Jerusalem there was a narrow gate known as the needle, which merchants would have to really coax, push, and pull their camels through when they were bearing merchandise to sell in the marketplace. That’s what Jesus was referring to. The

camel's carrying a heavy load – like the rich young man the disciples have just encountered – and it takes tremendous effort to get the beast through the narrow gate and on its way. “The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, ‘Who then can be saved?’” (verse 26).

All Things are Possible with God

Jesus' response is crucial. “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God,” (verse 27). Let's be very clear here today, church. No matter how much we have, we can't buy our way into heaven. No matter all the good works we do, we can't work our way into heaven. Salvation isn't something we can achieve on our own through good works, or even by following the commandments perfectly. And Jesus isn't saying that people who had wealth and possessions here will be excluded from entering heaven. What He's saying is that salvation is an act of grace. Even the rich young man could have been saved – not through his own actions, but through the grace of God – had he chosen to follow Christ fully.

Salvation is a free gift of God given to us through Jesus Christ, and to receive it, we must allow Christ to be King of every aspect of our lives. He loves us and everyone, but He loves us enough to not leave us in the state and situation in which He first finds us. Jesus promises the rich young man “treasure in heaven,” (verse 21) if he gives away his worldly possessions and follows Him. What do we value? What is it this morning that Christ is calling for you to yield control of over to Him, to bring you more fully into citizenship in God's kingdom?

We should be in a continual process of redefining and refining what we value. Worldly wealth and possessions are temporary, but spiritual wealth – love, grace, faith, and service to others – these are eternal things. Jesus' call to give to the poor isn't just about charity. It's about transferring our focus from worldliness to godliness. In contrast to the young man the disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. Peter even speaks up about this saying, “We have left everything to follow You!” (verse 28).

Jesus Says, “Come, Follow Me!”

Jesus reassures Peter – and us – with what He says next. “No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Me and the gospel 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,” (verses 29-30). This is a great reminder for us, that whatever we give up for Christ – whatever it is that we yield our control over to Him – is never truly lost. He continues to give us blessing upon blessing, and takes great care of us.

The story of the rich young man is a reminder of how our attachment to wealth and possessions can become a stumbling block in our spiritual journey with Jesus. It's not that wealth and possessions are evil, but our attachment to them can cloud our

vision – and our willingness – to fully embrace God’s call. Instead of listening to Jesus’ call to “Come, follow Me,” the rich young man went away heartbroken and downcast. The modern-day examples of Howard Hughes, Hetty Green, and Andrew Carnegie show us that even here in America, we can become enslaved by our possessions.

Jesus’ invitation to the rich young man is the same invitation He extends to each of us. He says, “Come, follow Me.” He invites us to let go of whatever it is that holds us back, to trust God’s provision, to pursue the treasures of heaven that will never fade, and to let the Holy Spirit push, prod, and sometimes kick old stubborn camels – like me and you – to get them to move through the needle’s eye.

Prayer: God of all who are cast down, You call us to seek good and to meet oppression with justice. Teach us to find salvation in the emptying of ourselves for the sake of those in need, so that goodness may prevail and Your kingdom come in Jesus Christ. Amen.