

Sermon for October 10, 2021—Mark 10:17-31 (Where the Last are First)

Our series on The Upside Down Kingdom continues to show us that our priorities are not God's priorities. Last week, we saw how Jesus turned his society's power structure on its head by lifting up divorced women and children, who were extremely vulnerable. Today, we'll see that Jesus challenges the standard economic wisdom of his time, and ours. As pastor Magrey deVaga says, "If money indeed makes the world go round, Jesus in this story effectively reverses the direction of the earth's rotation."

So hear these words from Mark 10:17-31 as I read from the Common English Bible.

READ CEB

Thanks be to God for the gift of Holy Scripture.

The two things Jesus had the most to say about were the Kingdom of God, and money. How lucky for us that today we get them both in this one reading. And while there are slight differences in how this story is told in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the main storyline is remarkably the same. How lucky, then, that we have to take this story seriously.

So, how to preach it? More importantly, how to live it? The text doesn't give easy answers.

First, let's acknowledge that this teaching of Jesus is not what many of us want to hear.

The suggestion that we have to *do* something to "inherit" eternal life, which is how most translations put it, doesn't fit with our theology, which teaches that there's no way to *earn our way* into heaven. And Jesus' instruction to sell everything flies in the face of our culture, which judges us on the stuff we own.

Not surprisingly, people have tried to tone down this story for ages.

For example, take verse 24. In the NRSV, Jesus says, "How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God." But look at your Bible's footnotes. Scholars discovered that in the fourth century, a scribe added words to the manuscript—which explains why some translations, like the King James, still say: How hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the Kingdom of God.

And whereas scripture never mentions a gate into Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle, a ninth century myth popularized that idea. Supposedly, this low, narrow gate allowed travelers into Jerusalem after the main gate was shut each night. The story goes that a single camel could squeeze under only after being unloaded, and crawling through on its knees.

Eye-of-the-Needle-Gate adherents believed that, when Jesus said it would be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter God's kingdom, he was only speaking to those who were *proud* of their wealth.

But guess what? In spite of YouTube videos showcasing "Eye of the Needle" Holy Land Tours, there is no archaeological evidence that such a gate ever existed. And even if one did, a camel's front and back knee joints face opposite directions. They can't crawl when they're down.

Maybe we just need to recognize that, as Faithful Friends sings about this one, "we misunderstand our Savior's teachings because we fail to see he's funny, too."

Perhaps the best we can do is recall that Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem...where he's going to be crucified. It's no wonder that Jesus asks his followers—including us—to make real sacrifices as well.

So where's the Good News? Well, personally, I like how this text begins.

I mean, this guy hears Jesus is coming...and *runs* to meet him. God's grace is calling him, just as it calls us.

Even before we learn this man is wealthy, we see that he's polite, and he's religious. He treats Jesus with respect, kneeling at his feet and calling him Good Teacher. He assures Jesus that he follows the commandments closely, and Jesus seems to believe him.

This man appears to have it all...but clearly, he knows he doesn't. Jesus knows it, too. So when the man asks what he must do to have eternal life, Jesus begins: "You are lacking one thing." And we learn that the man's *lacking* has everything to do with his excess, not his poverty.

Bible trivia—In Mark's gospel, this is the only individual Jesus is said to have loved. But it's tough love. Jesus knows this man's hold on his wealth is keeping him from fully experiencing God. So Jesus tells the man to go, sell, and give, before inviting him to come and follow.

But the man can't do it.

And you know what? Neither could I. I don't want to sell everything I own—nobody would buy the cats—and even if I could sell it all, *I'd* want to decide who gets the money. I don't feel rich. But wealth is my problem, too.

When someone asks me to do something I don't want to do, I may do it eventually, but I almost never do it right away. Do you? But Jesus tells us that with God, all things are possible.

I like to think that even though the man went away from this encounter grieving, for all we know, he was standing at the foot of the cross when Jesus died.

What is it about wealth that can keep us from being in relationship with Jesus? I suppose we could think of lots of things.

Wealth can make us falsely believe that we don't need God—that we're capable of taking care of ourselves by ourselves. And if we're busy taking care of our own needs, and our family's needs, then we can be reluctant to use our resources to take care of others.

Wealth can restrict our social circles. Our closest friends probably have about the same economic status that we do. We all buy similar stuff, and we spend similar amounts of time taking care of our stuff.

But God is all about relationship—and when our relationships exclude people with less, and people with more, then the entire community suffers.

Wealth can influence our opinions of people. Generally speaking, decades of social science research has shown that if I have more than you, I tend to see myself as better. And if you have more than me, I tend to see myself as worse—and consequently, I may act like someone I'm not.

And visa versa.

Common sense tells us that people living in wealthier nations will have happier, healthier, and longer lives. The only problem is, they don't. And if we think about it, we probably all know of people with lots of money, and lots of stuff, who aren't happy at all.

The most recent TED talk our study group watched was by Richard Wilkinson, who studies financial wealth and global health.

Wilkinson and others have over 20 years of data to show that nations with the greatest unequal distribution of wealth also have the highest rates of homicide, bullying, suicide, infant mortality, heart disease, depression, anxiety...and a bunch of other things, all of them bad.

The problem isn't the money itself—it's about the differences in how much money we have. Wilkinson explains that when people in a society have *about the same* amount of money, we can't look down on others for having less, or puff ourselves up for having more, so there's less conflict and more cooperation. Perhaps economic inequality is behind more of our nation's problems than we realize.

Jesus wasn't a scientist. But I think he knew that he couldn't just add a rich guy into the mix—regardless how much disciple-potential he had.

The gospels usually portray Jesus and his disciples as poor, homeless wanderers; like the rest, even the tax collector left everything behind when he decided to follow Jesus.

Would this rich guy in today's text have been content sleeping on the ground, or eating heads of grain? Would the other disciples have accepted him—especially having heard Jesus' teachings about money all these years? Holy Week begins in the next chapter—it's not like Jesus will be around to play referee.

On Thursday, we reflected on today's text after watching Wilkinson's TED talk. I believe MJ Ebenhack said it best when she asked, "Could Jesus have told this man anything else?"

If Jesus could tell each of us, "You are lacking one thing," what might that one thing be? And would we be able to do what he asked us to do about it?

I don't know. But if we could, I'm confident that we, as individuals, and as the church, would be blessed beyond belief. And today, I think that's pretty good news.

Will you pray with me—

Gracious and Loving God, thank you for gift of this morning and the gift of everyone here. And thank you for the gift of your son, Jesus. We confess that his teachings are hard—help us truly follow the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

We ask your blessing on all who are fighting COVID—the people who are sick and their families, the health care workers who are treating them, the researchers and scientists who are developing treatments, the agencies who are trying to get vaccines across the globe.

Bless those who are dealing with other illnesses too, and those recovering from surgery. Surround those who are grieving losses of all kinds with your presence, and with others who truly care.

It's easy to get discouraged, Lord. Help us find something to be joyful about each day, and help us bring joy to others. Remind us that you are sovereign, and that you love us.

And now we join together as one praying, **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

Offering—This is the point where we lift up the offering. You've already heard Pastor Karen talk about the blessing our Radio Ministry has been for 30 years—this is simply one of our many outreaches that make a real difference in people's lives. Thank you if you've moved to electronic giving, and thank you if you still put your offering in the plates at the back or mail it in. We couldn't be who we are as a church, or do what we do without you, without your generosity.

Invite to stand as you are able for our last hymn, **#399, Take My Life and Let It Be.**

Benediction—Let's go into the world this week sharing the love of God, the life of Jesus, and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Amen.