

Rich People and Camels

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Mark 10:17-31

We learned last week that helpless dependence was the requirement for entering into the Kingdom of God. We meet a man this morning that though genuinely interested in spiritual matters, he is the antithesis of helpless childlike faith that Jesus welcomed in the preceding verses. He was wealthy, a ruler, had everything that he needed and most likely everything that he wanted. He had prestige, authority, prominence, status – he lacked for nothing... or did he? From the world's perspective he had it all, but from Jesus' perspective he was bankrupt. Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens these words:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Mark 10:17–31

There are three main points that I want us to see from the text this morning:

- 1. The call to discipleship involves a cost of discipleship. (vs. 17-22)*
- 2. Jesus warns us against the dangers of misplaced trust. (vs. 23-27)*
- 3. Jesus promises us that not a single self-denying sacrifice made for Himself or the gospel will be overlooked or forgotten. (vs. 28-31)*

1. THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP INVOLVES A COST OF DISCIPLESHIP. (vs. 17-22)

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Mark writes, "As He was setting out on his journey [way]." This serves as a reminder that Jesus was headed to the cross in Jerusalem. As Jesus and His disciples are heading out they are met by a man, most likely finely robed and immaculately groomed, who kneels before Jesus on the dusty roadside, just outside of town, with a burning question in his heart. What do we know about this man? Matthew refers to him as a *young* man (Matthew 19:20) and Luke refers to him as a *ruler* (Luke 18:18). This young man may have been the ruler of a synagogue or town. In any event he occupied a place of prominence and authority. And on top of his position, he also had great possessions (v. 22). He was wealthy – hence we get the name Rich Young Ruler. He was the type of guy who, from the world's perspective, had everything. Yet, he was unsatisfied. The question that he posed to Jesus suggests that he felt a void that Jesus might be able to help him fill.

Kneeling in the dirt he looks up at Jesus and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This is an incredible question! Most of the wealthy, religious people who inquired of Jesus in public were trying to trick him into making a thoughtless or contradictory statement. You'll remember some of those familiar questions, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:36). "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" (Luke 20:22). "Why do your disciples pick grain on the Sabbath?" (Luke 6:2). "This woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Shouldn't we stone her as Moses commanded?" (John 8:4-5). But this man's question was no trick. It was a sincere question to which he earnestly sought an answer.

But it's interesting to note that while this young man asks Jesus the most important question that a person can ever ask – a question that Jesus' own disciples hadn't even asked - Jesus doesn't immediately answer his question. Jesus first deals with the way the man addressed Him - "good teacher". In the Old Testament and in subsequent Jewish thought, only God is characteristically referred to as "good." While the young man had great respect for Jesus as a man who could show him the way to God, he regarded Jesus only as a distinguished teacher and not the Son of God who demands our total allegiance and complete commitment. When Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone," He is saying, "I am God." We must understand that fundamental truth if we are to understand anything else Jesus says to us. Jesus isn't just a good moral

teacher; He is God in flesh (John 1:1). Furthermore, if no one is good but God alone, that means that we aren't good and therefore each one of us is found to be deficient before God.

Now to the burning question this young man posed to Jesus. He asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Matthew records him asking, "What good *deed* must I do to have eternal life?" While the young man undoubtedly had genuine spiritual interest, he clearly had a superficial view of salvation. He was looking for Jesus to simply prescribe a deed that would settle his account with God once and for all. His question reflects the fact that his understanding of salvation and eternal life was that it could be *earned* or *merited* – a fatal assumption that is prevalent in our own day.

Look at how Jesus answers his question in verse 19 – He points him to the Law. Jesus said, "You know the commandments: Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother." You can almost picture the young man thinking to himself, "Check, check, check, check, check." External obedience to the Law was the cultural standard for righteousness. The young man's confidence must have surged as he listened to Jesus enumerate the legal requirements of the Law. But sadly he misunderstood the Law's true purpose. You see, the Law was never meant to save us. The Law was given to be like a mirror, exposing our sin and inadequacy before God. Not only did the young man have a superficial view of salvation, that it could be earned or merited, but he also had a superficial view of his sin – those two always go hand in hand. Look at the young man's response when Jesus confronts him with the Law. He confidently says, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

What's the young man saying here? He's saying that he's blameless and without error before God. He had forgotten Isaiah's words, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and *all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*" Isaiah 64:6. It was a commonly held assumption among the Jewish people that a person had the ability to keep or fulfill God's commandments. Even Paul said that before his conversion he considered himself faultless under the law (Phil. 3:6). In all reality this man is a clear picture of many professing Christians in our day. They are religious and like the idea of God (mostly a god of their own design), but they have no true conception of their sinfulness and guilt before God. They flatter themselves. Thinking they have never committed any "heinous acts," they falsely presume that they're in no danger of missing heaven. As long as we think we can keep the Law of God, as long as we think our conduct and behavior can earn salvation, then Jesus Christ profits us nothing.

But Jesus could see right through this young man's casual concept of goodness and righteousness – and He can see right through ours as well. Look at Jesus' response in v.21. Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The word for *look* has the idea of looking intently, examining or scrutinizing like a physician does his patient. Jesus didn't just look at the man, He looked at him and loved him (agape - the highest form of love in the NT). What a picture of

compassion. There was something special about this young man – to no one else in Mark's gospel is it said that Jesus "loved (agape) him."

With that look of love came a radical call to self-denial. While the young man may have obeyed the external requirements of the Law, Jesus shattered his self-perception of goodness by exposing the fact that the young man had violated the first and foremost commandment – to have no other gods before Him. Jesus puts his finger right on the idol of this man's heart and says, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." It's interesting to note that the children in the previous story possess nothing but they are also said to lack nothing. On the contrary, this young man possess everything, but yet he also still lacks something. What was the one thing the young man lacked? Outwardly he had it altogether, but inwardly he lacked *repentance* and a *living faith in God*.

Jesus didn't require the young man to go and sell all his possessions because He is an advocate for socialistic wealth redistribution. Jesus requires this man to sell all his possessions because they had become the supreme object of love and trust in his life – they had taken the place of God in his heart. First and foremost, we are to love the Lord our God and put our trust in Him. Selling his possessions and giving to the poor wouldn't have saved the man – no one is saved by their works (Galatians 2:16). Rather, selling his possessions would have been the outward demonstration that this man had put his hope in Jesus and experienced saving grace. Sacrificing his earthly treasures would have been visible fruit that he had become a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17); that He had a repentant heart.

By the way, for this man to obey Jesus' call to discipleship it would have meant relinquishing more than his material possessions. Giving up his wealth would have meant also giving up his status, influence, power, leadership, possibly even his family. There is a cost involved in following Christ. The cost is total commitment and surrender. Jesus' words in Luke 14:33 are sobering, "Therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Jesus demands our whole heart - He will never settle for second place. Jesus will have all of us or none of us – that's how jealous His love is for us! Look at what Jesus offered the man. He offered him the same thing that he offers you and me this morning. Jesus offers *Himself* as a substitute for the man's possessions. Jesus demands from us things we, in our flesh, would keep; but offers us things, namely Himself, that our hearts could never imagine.

The young man's question about eternal life, which had begun with such high hopes, ended sadly. Look at the wealthy young man's response to Jesus in verse 22. Mark writes, "Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." Jesus' words were unwelcome to the young man. His smile of anticipation gave way to a disheartened frown of disappointment when Jesus' words punctured the balloon of his easy optimism. He wanted salvation on his own terms – which is never possible – and therefore he left empty-hearted and empty-handed.

The word disheartened (*stugnazo*) has the idea of an overcast sky before a storm. This young man turned away from the light of Jesus' presence and call and turned towards the storm of his idolatrous heart. Unfortunately, this response to the call of discipleship isn't isolated to this wealthy young man. Many "religious" people have run to and knelt before Jesus but when charged with the task to resign all other allegiances and truly follow Him, they have turned away and refused to follow.

Native tribes in Africa used to catch monkeys by hollowing out a coconut, filling it with peanuts and tethering the coconut to a tree. The monkey, who thought he'd found a treasure, would reach into the hole which was made large enough for a flexible hand to enter but not large enough for a closed fist to exit. The tribal people could walk right up to the monkey and kill it because the monkey was so desirous for his possessions that he was unwilling to let them go. Is that you? This is a clear picture of what Jesus was talking about just two chapters back when He said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?*" Mark 8:34–36. Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

2. JESUS WARNS US OF THE DANGERS OF MISPLACED TRUST. (vs. 23-27)

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

I don't think the wealthy young man was alone in his disappointment and sorrow. I think Jesus was surrounded by twelve disciples who were perplexed and even let down by His words. As the disciples listened to Jesus dialogue with the wealthy young man, they are confronted with their own presumptions concerning discipleship. And so Jesus, like He always does, takes advantage of this teachable moment with His disciples. He looked at His men and said, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words.

Why do you suppose the disciples were *amazed* at his words in verse 24 and *exceedingly astonished* at His words in verse 26? The disciples were so shocked by Jesus' words because the prevailing thought amongst the Jewish people, including the disciples, was that material wealth was a sign of God's divine favor and poverty was a sign of God's curse. Prosperity theology is no new phenomenon. So when Jesus calls the wealthy young man to forsake his wealth and then turns around and tells his disciples that it will be difficult for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom

of God – it defied their theological understanding. The whole point that Jesus is making in verses 23-27 is that salvation is by grace and He's going to make that point by way of illustration.

Look at verse 25. Jesus says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." A camel was the largest animal in Palestine at the time and the eye of a needle was the smallest conceivable opening. The violent contrast between a camel and the eye of a needle was a colorful way of illustrating impossibility. Just as it's impossible for a camel to enter through the eye of needle, so it is impossible for anyone to enter into the Kingdom of God if he places his faith and trust in any other place but Christ alone.

While wealth is the issue of misplaced trust here in our text, anything that keeps a person from recognizing their dependency and childlikeness before God, and prevents them from following Jesus – that too is a camel before the eye of a needle. Jesus isn't making a blanket statement that wealthy people cannot be saved. Rather, He is making the connection between an abundance of possessions and the corresponding lack of humble dependence (childlike faith) that oftentimes accompanies that wealth.

Money isn't intrinsically evil but Jesus warned us that material possessions can easily capture the affections of our hearts. Jesus cautioned us in the Sermon on the Mount when He said, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" Matthew 6:19–21. *Money can be a wonderful servant, but will always be a terrible master.* In the case of this young man the deceitfulness of riches choked the soil of his heart so that he was unable to receive the seed of the Word and believe (Matthew 13:22).

It's important to understand that this text is descriptive and not prescriptive. In other words, we aren't called to *universalize* this text. Jesus isn't saying that every person has to sell all their possessions before they can follow him. Neither is He saying that a true Christian can't be wealthy. But just as important as it is not to universalize this text, so it is just as important not to *dismiss* it. Although we may not be required to sell all our possessions in order follow Christ, we are required to hold our possessions in an "open hand," being willing to allow Jesus to take from us whatever might contend for the affections of our hearts. Likewise, not every Christian is obligated to literally sell all that he possesses. But every Christian is obligated to have the kind of heart, albeit by the grace of God, that that is *willing* to relinquish all we possess. Proverbs 30:8-9 is a wonderful prayer for every Christian: Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God."

Look at the question the disciples pose in verse 26. Exceedingly astonished by Jesus' teaching concerning wealth and the Kingdom of God they ask, "Then who can be saved?" In other words, if the wealthy, whom God supposedly favored, aren't the ones who will inherit the Kingdom of God, then who will be saved? Jesus replies in verse 27, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." Jesus is saying that salvation is completely outside the sphere of human possibilities. We can't earn it or merit it on our own. We've all failed; we're all lacking, but Jesus saves! Jesus offers grace to all who come to Him in humble faith and repentance. All who like a child come recognizing that they are spiritually bankrupt, possessing nothing and needing everything - to them God grants His grace!

3. JESUS PROMISES US THAT NOT A SINGLE SELF-DENYING SACRIFICE MADE FOR HIMSELF OR THE GOSPEL WILL BE OVERLOOKED OR FORGOTTEN. (vs. 28-31)

Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

In verses 28-31 Jesus transitions from *warning* to *promise*. In light of his concern about how he could be saved, Peter, dear Peter, reminds Jesus what he and the disciples have left to follow Jesus. Peter said, "See, we have left everything and followed you." What had they given up? Andrew, James, Peter and John gave up their fishing boats and nets. Matthew left his lucrative tax collector's position. Others undoubtedly gave up relationships, status, positions, authority, prominence, etc.

In Matthew's account Peter asks, "What then will we have?" In other words, "Jesus we've given up everything for you, what will we get in return?" This question reflects that Peter has a somewhat commercial view of the Christian life (here is what I've given now what do I get) – I presume that that sentiment isn't absent among some of us this morning. Look at what Jesus says to Peter's query in verses 29-30. He says, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."

What is Jesus saying here? He is saying that for those who follow Him, for those who take up their cross and deny themselves – Jesus will make up for every loss. Our light afflictions this side of eternity will one day soon give way to glorious heavenly treasure that will far exceed our grandest hopes. What is that reward; what is that treasure? I am persuaded that heaven's greatest treasure is Christ Himself. That is what Jesus was offering to the rich young man. Where is the encouragement to serve Christ you ask? It's right here!

Notice that Jesus draws our attention back to the cost of following him. He says that we can expect persecution for bearing His name. Jesus is reminding the disciples and us that the Christian life is not a shield against adversity and hardship. Just as wealth isn't a sign of divine favor, so persecutions aren't a sign of divine abandonment. Jesus had already warned the disciples that He would suffer at the hands of sinful men, now He informs us that we too will have our share of persecution. Warren Wiersbe reminds us, "God always balances blessings with battles."

Jesus ends with a summarizing paradox in verse 31. He says, "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." To the world, the rich young man was clearly among the first and the disciples among the last or the least. But Jesus sees things from an entirely different perspective. Those who are first in their own eyes will be last in God's eyes and those who are last in their own eyes will be first. What a promise!

The rewards of eternal life make the sacrifices of discipleship look insignificant in comparison. I am reminded of the missionary Hudson Taylor who endured many hardships. He was arrested, insulted, slandered and lived most of his missionary days in poverty. But he lived his life believing what Jesus said in verses 29-30 - that if we give up anything for the sake of the gospel we will receive blessings one hundred times better in this life, and eternal life in the world to come. Armed with that truth, he could truly say, "I never made a sacrifice."