

**The Kingdom And The Cross:  
Gaining By Giving Up  
Mark 10:17-31  
March 17, 2024**

I grew up in a middle-class household. Looking back, I can now realize that when I was young, money was probably tighter than I knew, but I never went without anything I needed. I even had a good bit of what I wanted. But as was true for all of us, I eventually became aware of economic differences between our household and others. On the one hand, there were kids in my school who had much less than I did. Some of them lived way below the poverty line. In fact, the poverty rate in our South Georgia county was so high that every child in the entire school system qualified for free breakfast and free lunch, no questions asked.

Meanwhile, there were others in my friend group who had way more than I did. I remember the awkwardness of learning how to navigate those differences. When I went to their houses, I could see they had stuff we didn't and probably never would. What are you supposed to do when you're ten-years old and you notice this kind of thing? Are you supposed to talk about it or supposed to ignore it?

Today, at 52-years old, I'd like to think I'd like to think I have a simple answer to that question, but even as adults we aren't sure what to do when it comes to the awkward question of wealth. On the one hand, we like the status and the security that comes from having some money in our pockets. Why else would we pay attention to the labels on our clothes or the make of the car we drive or the zip code we live in? On the other hand, we don't want to call too much attention to our financial condition, because we don't want to deal with the awkwardness of acknowledging that we have more or less than the person next to us. That's why I say we have a love-hate relationship with money. We'd rather leave the financial part of my life in the shadows.

That's why I have always disliked this passage that we just read, because Jesus – as he so often does – confronts the matter directly. He doesn't protect us from the awkwardness of the moment or the importance of the issue. We are told in verse 17 that a man ran up to Jesus and fell on his knees. At this early point in this story, this is all we know about him. He is a man. So far, so good. Lots of people come up to Jesus and fall on their knees. But a few verses later, we learn something very important about this man. Verse 22 tells us that he had great wealth.

Now, I don't know about you, but I would have been fine if Mark had omitted that little detail. If we could stick with the fact that he is just a man, then we could safely spiritualize or generalize this story to the point that it no longer bothers us. But that is not what happens. Everybody who came to Jesus had a problem they needed him to fix. They were sick, or they were blind, or they were demon-possessed, or they were hungry. Well, this man also has a problem for Jesus to fix. His problem is money. And with that, we all start shifting anxiously in our seats.

It is uncomfortable to say, but Jesus cares enormously about money and wealth. In fact, we can almost say that money was his single-most favorite subject. Jesus talked about money more often than he talked about sex. He talked about money more often than he talked forgiveness. He talked about money six times more often than he talked about love. The only subject he talked about more often than money was the topic of the kingdom of God, and many times he talked about money in relation to the kingdom of God, just as he did in today's passage.

We need to hear his words in this story against the backdrop of the prevailing view of money and wealth in those days. The common understanding of his day was that wealth meant God was blessing you because you were a righteous person. It was

his reward for your faithfulness. Meanwhile, if you were poor, it meant God was cursing you, probably because you displeased him. It was a wonderfully convenient way to account for all those economic differences I mentioned before. There's nothing awkward about it. If you live in an upscale neighborhood and drive a BMW, it just means you are a better person and therefore God loves you more.

Of course, the Bible is never that simple and straightforward on the matter, so neither was Jesus. The written word and the Living Word always speak with the same voice. On the one hand, there are instances in Scripture where people receive material prosperity as a direct result of God's blessing. In the book of Genesis, for example, Abraham and then later his son Isaac are said to have great wealth because God blessed them. Their wealth was a sign of God's covenant with them, so God is obviously not opposed to putting wealth in the hands of his people if it serves his purposes.

And yet at the same time, the Bible makes it abundantly and repeatedly clear that God looks with favor and mercy on the poor and the downcast. If you were to take a marker and scratch through all the verses in the Bible that speak of how God cares for the destitute and the needy, you would be left with a book that is

not readable. I know that it is not a popular thing to say in today's politically charged climate, but it is the simple truth. God cares deeply for those who live on the economic margins of society.

So, we cannot make an overly simplistic statement about the subjects of wealth and poverty. Having wealth doesn't necessarily mean we are righteous people, and yet having wealth also does not make us evil. 1 Timothy 6:10 does not say that money is the root of all evil; it says the love of money is. We also cannot say that lack of wealth is a sign of God's displeasure on us, nor does poverty mean that God is going to let us off the hook. There are rich crooks and there are poor crooks. Just as importantly, there are wealthy people who are born again, and there are poor people who are born again. And there are also a bunch of folks on both sides of the economic ledger who aren't. So, what can we say about money and the kingdom? To answer that question takes us back to the specifics of the story.

The man comes wanting to know how to inherit eternal life. Understand that at this point in Scripture, the term "eternal life" did not refer only to life that begins when we die. It refers to the quality of one's life lived in the presence of God, beginning in the present moment. For this man to ask how to inherit eternal life was another way of asking how to live in the kingdom of God.

Skilled teacher that he was, Jesus turned the question back on the man, inviting him to participate in uncovering the truth of the answer. He asks the man to share what he knows and what he has done in an effort to figure this out. The man reports how he has earnestly tried to live a good life, how he has been diligent to observe the rules and laws of his Jewish faith, yet obviously something is still missing. Otherwise, he wouldn't be asking Jesus.

Having forced the man to acknowledge his own shortcoming, Jesus confirms that the man does indeed still lack something, and that ironically, the way to find what he lacks is to get rid of everything he owns. In this case, the man will find what is missing not by acquiring more, but by letting go. Why?

Well, to answer that question maybe it is helpful to notice the contrast between this story and the one that comes right before it. In the immediately preceding verses, Jesus has his famous encounter with children. Mark 10:13 says that people were bringing their children to Jesus for him to bless them, but his disciples tried to shoo them away. As far as they were concerned, Jesus had more important things to do than be bothered with a bunch of restless, noisy kids. But Jesus rebuked his disciples for their actions. He told them to let the children come, because *“the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone*

*who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”*

What do children have that qualifies them for the kingdom of God? The answer is nothing! Financially, children have nothing. They don't have bank accounts or ways of earning money to put in those accounts. They can't acquire property or make business deals. They can't climb the social ladder. They are totally dependent on others to provide for their needs. And while we are at it, they don't have anything to offer religiously either. Children can't serve on the personnel committee at the church or lead the worship music or plan the next capital campaign. All they can do is show up when others bring them and share their enthusiasm for being here. Children have nothing of worldly value to offer, and yet Jesus says that the kingdom belongs to them.

Contrast those children with the man in this story. He seemingly has everything to offer. Notice first his religious accomplishments. He has kept the religious law since he was old enough to know how to do so. In other words, he has made a good faith effort to be a good religious person. And financially, he has everything. We don't know how he came about his wealth – whether he inherited it or earned it through savvy business deals or just good ole' hard work – but either way he has managed to

secure his own future. Or so it would seem. But Jesus says this man still lacks what he needs to enter the kingdom.

So, what does he lack? Dependence. He lacks a heart of dependence. This man is clinging to his own accomplishments and his own status, as if that is enough to secure his presence before God. But it doesn't work that way; the only way to truly come before God is to acknowledge our complete and utter dependence upon Him. He is the One who has given us life. He is the One who gives us every breath we breathe. He is the One who determines the number of our days. He is the One who is able to forgive all our sins. He is the One who has given us His Son, that we might be restored to fellowship with God. And none of this is earned. None of this is accomplished. None of this is bought. None of this is deserved. None of this is the result of anything we have done. Entering the kingdom comes only by acknowledging our utter and complete dependence upon God.

So here is the great irony of this story: this man can only find the thing he is missing by letting go of what he has. Our culture pressures us to constantly gain more, earn more, accomplish more, accumulate more, but the gospel tells us to move in the opposite direction. This man doesn't need to acquire something else. He's got to let go of what he already has. Only



then can he know what it means to depend upon God. Only then can he understand the true meaning of grace.

So, how does this story from so long ago apply to us today? Here are two takeaways. First, God cares enormously what we do with our money. We can't have a meaningful conversation about life in the kingdom of God until we deal with the thorny question of wealth – regardless of how much or how little we have of it. For starters, this means we need to learn how to give it away. The problem with money is that more often than not, we don't have it; it has us. Money controls us way more than we think it does. And the best way get out from under the control of money is give it away. Again, that takes us in the opposite direction of where our culture tells us to go, but learning the habit of generosity and sacrificial giving can, over time, loosen the anxious grip money has over us. This is why Scripture says God loves a cheerful giver, because such a person is on the way to having his or her character reshaped into the image of Christ.

Beyond what we give away, we need to be thoughtful and conscientious about how we spend the rest of it. Are we spending our dollars on things that are truly useful or on things that only increase our status? Are we spending on things that promote the good others, or only on things that feed our personal desires? Are

we spending on things that honor God, or on things that reinforce the corrupt ways of this world? Are we spending in ways that are wise, or foolish? The answers to such questions won't always be easy or straightforward, so we have to be constantly vigilant and discerning, but at the root of that search is the awareness that God cares greatly about what we do with our money. What we do with our material wealth is tied directly to our desire to live in the kingdom of God. That's the first take away.

Here's the second. We must be willing to let go of anything that stands between us and our dependence upon and obedience to Christ. For the man in our story, that meant getting rid of his material wealth. But we shouldn't think we are off the hook simply because aren't fabulously wealthy. All of us have things that we must let go of in order to turn to Christ in faith. And many times, the thing we are being asked to let go of will be costly. For some of us, that may mean there is a relationship that needs to be set aside because it does not align with God's design for our lives. For some of us there is a lifestyle that needs to be changed because it does not honor His purposes. For some of us, there is a habit that needs to be acknowledged and broken because it is moving us away from Him. For some of us, there is an attitude or a mindset that needs to be abandoned because it does not reflect his will.

We could go on and on, imagining all of things that Christ might be asking us to set aside, but whatever the specific of our personal situation might be, the basic truth remains the same for all of us: Jesus does not apologize for asking us to pay a costly price for the privilege of living in God's kingdom. That's because we cannot pursue the things of this world and the things of God's kingdom at the same time. As long as we cling to the things of this world, we will not live in a spirit of dependence upon God.

But we have this promise: whatever we are being asked to let go of; Christ gives us more than we could ever imagine. He has laid down his own life that we might gain all eternity. And that is worth more than we could ever measure.

In the end, this story points us to the good news: the kingdom of God is open and free to any who will enter. There is nothing we must do to prove ourselves worthy of it. There is nothing we must do to earn it. We can't buy our way into it. We can't achieve our way into it. We can't do anything to make us ineligible for it. In the end, it will cost us everything, and yet it is free for the taking. Come and receive the good news.