



“Ruling Our Riches”

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Mark 10:17-31

We've been in the Gospel of Mark for a long time and I don't know about you, but I'm just a little tired of people not understanding what it means to follow Jesus? Peter doesn't want to believe that Jesus will suffer and die. The disciples argue about who is the greatest and Jesus says they should be servants of all. Then Jesus declares, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And now today, we get this man. In Matthew and Luke, we find out he is a rich young ruler. But here, we only get that he is a man. And I like that. I like it because I get to put myself into the story. I am that man. I'm not rich and I'm not really all that young anymore. But, without the labels, this guy could be any of us. He is a soul in search for something, a soul in search for meaning. And this man, this fellow, who obviously hadn't heard Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God, kneels before Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” What must I do? One can rarely do anything for an inheritance. An inheritance is something a person is given, is something a person receives. What must I do? He is asking the wrong question.

And Jesus, as he journeyed closer to his passion and death, was ready to pass along to this man an inheritance. But, before that could happen, this man lacked just one thing. Only one thing? Well, as we heard in the text, it is really three things: to sell what he has, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus. If we dig deeper, I think we are meant to connect the phrase “that he lacks one thing” to the answer of following Jesus, being a disciple of Christ. Because I think this request to give up all he owned was a unique request, a request specific to this gentleman. It was something that only this man could do to follow Jesus. Every person that followed Jesus had to lay down something important to them. The disciples? They had to leave their nets, their profession, the thing they were attached to most. The sons of Zebedee, left their father in the boat. And for the man in this story, he had to leave his riches. For me it might be to let go of doubt and worry and lean into where God has me right now. For you it might be releasing pride so God can soften you and mold you. Perhaps for others of us it might be letting go of anger so that we can move forward with an uplifted spirit and upright heart. Whatever it is we need to get rid of, do it. Because when we do, we will be able to reach out to others and hold tighter to them. That is what it means to follow Jesus. That is what it means to gain that one thing that you lack. Let go and follow.

But selling what he had and giving it to the poor in order to follow Christ was too extreme for this man. The way Jesus wanted him to follow was just too much. Keeping laws, being a good person, saying prayers, that stuff he could do. But to really stretch himself? To relinquish the power that riches had over him and instead rule the riches? That was too much, too extreme. And following Jesus was indeed an extreme action, one that the man simply couldn't do. And so, the man went away sad and dismayed, unable to receive the inheritance, to do what Jesus had asked him to do.

Jesus then had another teaching moment for his scatterbrained disciples. He taught them that it is impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom, as impossible as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Well, if a rich person, who is blessed by God and equipped to do the most good in the world can't be saved... well then, who can be saved? If a rich person who had all honor and prestige in a society that connected God's blessing to wealth, if that person can't be saved, who really can be saved? And Jesus responded, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." The workings of God are made known in those who had dropped everything, left it all behind, and followed Jesus, because the last will be first and the first will be last.

As I pondered this narrative, I noticed that leaving everything behind and following Jesus wasn't the only extreme part of this text. The whole lesson today is made up of extremes. It is made up of extreme demands (sell everything, give to the poor, and follow me.) It is made up of extreme judgment (it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God), and extreme promises (with God all things are possible; whoever leaves everything and follows me will receive great rewards). It seems that when our riches rule us, rather than us ruling our riches, we find that life is just a bunch of extremes. And this causes tensions in us, doesn't it? We heard a difficult text last week about divorce and marriage and our welcoming of children. These difficult lessons of Jesus can be used in negative ways or in positive ways. They can hurt and hinder or they can help and heal. I think Jesus is calling us to use who we are and what we possess to uplift others... and in so doing we uplift Christ and are disciples on the way.

I think that is why Jesus talks in such extreme ways about the power of wealth to distract and detract from following him. But we can say that about anything right? Maybe power is more important than service. Maybe gossip is more important than trust. Maybe advancement is more important than respect. We have all of these important things in our lives that take us to the extreme edges of ourselves if they are not held in the right perspective. Holding loosely those things that weigh us down might make it easier to keep pace with Christ on the journey.

A young businessman was at the pier of a small coastal village when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Seeing several large yellowfin tuna inside the small boat, the businessman complimented the fisherman on the quality of the fish and asked how long it took to catch them. "Only a little while", the fisherman replied.

A little surprised, the young businessman asked, "Why didn't you stay out longer and catch more fish?" The content fisherman said, "This is enough to support my family's immediate needs. I don't need any more." "But what do you do with the rest of your time?" asked the confused young man. "I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take a walk with my wife, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my buddies; I have a full and busy life."

The lad scoffed, "I am a Harvard MBA and could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat. Then with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, and eventually you would have a fleet of fishing boats. Instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor, eventually opening your own

cannery. You would control the product, processing, and distribution. You would need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to LA and eventually NYC where you will run your expanding enterprise.”

The fisherman asked, “How long will this all take?” to which the young man replied, “15-20 years.” “But what then?” The business man laughed and said “That’s the best part. When the time is right you would announce an IPO and sell your company stock to the public and become very rich, you would make millions.”

“Millions, sir? Then what?”

“Then you would retire, move to a small coastal fishing village where you would sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take a walk with your wife, stroll to the village in the evenings where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your buddies.”

When we release all of who we are and what we have to God, it becomes easier to trust God with the outcome of our lives. And that is a hard thing, to give up control. We want to make sure everything is ok with our health, with our families, with our 401Ks, with our bank accounts. We are ok with riches ruling us as long as we don’t have to be worried about the future. But that is why I think this text might be even more complicated and complex than last week’s text on divorce. For you see, we are trying the best we can. Aren’t you trying the best you can to be a good person and do the right thing? Jesus knew that of the rich young man. He knew that the man had come to him out of a sincere desire to do whatever it took to receive the kingdom. And because of his sincere desire, did you hear Jesus’ response? The text says, “Jesus loved him.” Jesus loved him!

And Jesus loves us, even when we refuse to give up those treasures that are so important to us. Jesus loves us, even when we can’t seem to give God our all and we hang our heads in shame. Jesus loves us, even when we can’t give much money to the church but we can paint a door, volunteer in the kitchen, or visit someone in the hospital. Jesus loves us, even when we white-knuckle the things that are important to us and refuse to let go. Jesus loves us! And we need that love of Jesus because often our riches rule us and hold us captive. Rather than saying that riches were a sin and they must be vanquished from his life, Jesus simply confronted the man in his weakness, his captivity to his possessions that prevented him from living into the full life of the kingdom. Jesus named that power that held the man captive and invited him to step into freedom. Jesus wanted him to be free because he loved him.

Author Jacques Ellul notes the only way to live free from that thing which has power over us is to give it away. He uses the topic of money to make his point. He says, “How to overcome the spiritual ‘power’ of money? Not by accumulating more money, not by using money for good purposes, not by being just and fair in dealings. The law of money is the law of accumulation, of buying and selling. That is why the only way to overcome the spiritual power of money is to give our money away, thus desacralizing it and freeing ourselves from its control... To give away is to win a victory over the spiritual power that oppresses us.”

And this Gospel lesson today isn't meant to say that everyone who is rich is simply supposed to give up everything they have, serve and provide for the poor, and follow in the way of Jesus. Because honestly, compared to the rest of the world, all of us in this room are beneficiaries of a privileged Western context. What I think we need to hear from this text today is that we should not intentionally cause harm with our wealth and our power and our privilege. Just like the man, Jesus can see that we are doing the best we can. Just like the man, Jesus loves us. Jesus knows that we are captive to all of the powers that are too large for us and that we are unable to control. And Jesus spoke the words to the rich young ruler and speaks to us today because Jesus wants us to be free. Jesus wants us to thrive and enjoy our existence and live lives of love. And it might seem impossible. Our ambitions or our fears might cause us to grasp the edges of that eye of the needle so that we just can't go through. But even then, Jesus promises, "All things are possible with God."

One way that we are able to let go and let God work in and through us is to change the focus of our questions. You see, the man asked a simple question, but one that was centered upon himself. He asked, "How might I inherit eternal life?" The man was concerned about his own actions, his own future, his own life. But Jesus, as Jesus usually does, changes the focus from the person's needs to the needs of others. Did you catch that? When the man asked how he might be saved, Jesus responded with the action to give up everything he has and give it to the poor. Jesus knew that by saving others, the man would end up saving himself.

Do you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? Jesus told the parable because a man rich in knowledge and power, a teacher of the law, stood up and asked the same question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus told the story of the Samaritan who gave up his status, his money, his time, and his safety, to help someone in need. The way Jesus told the teacher of the law to find eternal life was by giving his life away, not just a little, but all of it. Jesus turned that focus away from the petitioner's concern with his own salvation toward the gracious behavior towards others. The Samaritan, the outcast, the religious heretic, was lifted up as the example of the good neighbor. Likewise, the rich man was encouraged to go, sell all he had, give it to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. So, we must be clear that this text isn't just about the giving up of wealth. It is about finding salvation. It is about that which makes us free. It is about that which sets the world free. What is it that brings salvation? It is giving up those things that weigh us down, all of it, because that is what saves.

As I was writing on Friday, I remembered a story written by Soren Kierkegaard: Once upon a time there was a fire in a small town. The fire brigade rushed to the scene, but the firemen were unable to get through to the burning building. The problem was the crowd of people who had gathered not to watch but to help put out the fire. They all knew the fire chief well – their children had climbed over his fire engines during excursions to the fire station, and the friendliness of the fire chief was legendary. So, when a fire broke out the people rushed out to help their beloved fire chief.

Unfortunately, the townsfolk were seeking to extinguish this raging inferno with water pistols! They'd all stand there, from time to time squirting their pistol into the fire while making casual conversation.

The fire chief couldn't contain himself. He started screaming at the townsfolk. "What do you think you're doing? What on earth do you think you're going to achieve with those water pistols?!"

The people realized the urgency of the situation. How they wanted to help the fire chief. So, they started squirting more. "Come on" they encouraged each other, "We can all do better, can't we?" Squirt, squirt, squirt, squirt.

Exasperated the fire chief yells again. "Get out of here. You're achieving nothing except hindering us from doing what needs to be done. We need firemen who are ready to give everything they've got to put out this fire, people willing even to lay their lives on the line. This is not the place for token contributions"

This tale reminds us that discipleship to Christ means much more than token levels of support to the church and God's mission in the world. It calls for wholehearted and total life commitment. The man in our lesson today was unwilling to give up that one thing, the one thing he lacked. And in so doing, he went away sad. In the end, following Jesus means laying down that one thing that we hold dear and focusing on the wellbeing of others rather than ourselves. For if we do that, our riches might then begin to release us, and we will receive the freedom and inheritance and salvation of God.

Amen.