

Mark 10:17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Mark 10:23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Mark 10:28 Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

## MUDDY WATER

I think that many people want me to interpret what Jesus says and boil it down to a sentence that will fit on a bumper sticker.

In fact that was the way I was taught to do sermons. My preaching professors said that all sermons need a clear statement of purpose and everything else in the sermon should support that statement.

But, suppose it's not that simple. Suppose Jesus didn't want to make things more clear for us. Suppose he wanted to muddy the water. Suppose he wanted us to doubt our most basic assumptions so that we could learn to trust in him alone instead of our own desires.

If that's true then sometimes I need to preach a sermon that can't be neatly summarized in a pithy positive pronouncement. Sometimes the message that Jesus gives us is designed to create some "dis-ease" in our life of ease.

Sometimes you shouldn't be going home feeling a sense of confidence and faith after the sermon. Sometimes you should be going home with a feeling that something is missing, that some of your most cherished beliefs might even be misguided. Instead of calming our anxiety the job of a good sermon in some cases is to increase our anxiety

## MONEY WORRIES

And nothing makes us more anxious than a strong message about our money.

I saw a poll yesterday about what people were worried about most. One percent listed immigration reform. One percent listed global warming. Seven percent listed the war. Nineteen percent listed the health care debate. And forty three percent were most worried about the economy.

Start messing with someone's pocketbook and you will see what they really believe. Forty three percent think

that money is more important than the lives being lost in war, the health of our planet and even our own health.

Certainly we are a people who are anxious about our money and our financial well being. Considering what has happened to the stock market and the job market in this past year, you can understand our concern. We all need a way to make a living and take care of our family.

But, sometimes it seems that our anxiety about money is out of proportion to the problem. We love our money. We are fascinated with those who are able to assemble large sums of money.

But, according to the Bible, our priorities are misplaced. The love of money is the root of all evil. Getting more of it won't take away our anxiety. In fact in some cases it seems to only increase our anxiety.

## A WORRIED RICH MAN

Take the example that we have in our Scripture lesson for today. Jesus, a wandering preacher who has no wealth meets a man who has great wealth.

But, notice who is anxious. It is the wealthy man. According to the Bible he runs up to Jesus, falls on his knees and fervently asks the question that has been on his

mind, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This is a very anxious man. He is worried about his very soul. He has no inner assurance that when the “roll is called up yonder” he’ll be there.

Now that’s odd. Many people in those days believed that if you had a lot of money God had blessed you. Money was a sign of divine favor. Surely a wealthy man would feel that God was on his side.

But, in this case money was not enough to bely his anxiety. And so Jesus asks him, “Have you tried religion? Have you kept the commandments?” And the man replied, “I’ve kept all the commandments since I was a little boy.”

## JESUS LOVED HIM

Jesus didn’t dispute this point with the man. In fact the Bible tells us that Jesus looked at this man and loved him. Jesus was impressed. He was indeed a very good, rich man.

But, being rich and religious was not enough. The rich man knew that he needed something else in order to

inherit real life, eternal life. What was missing in his life? Why did he feel so uneasy about relationship with God?

Jesus knew what he needed. He needed to sell what he owned, give the money to the poor and then follow Jesus. He needed to learn to trust in God alone instead of his own abilities and resources.

So, out of love Jesus told him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

This is only time in Mark’s gospel that Jesus makes such a demand about possessions. Why did he make such a stringent requirement of this man that he loved?

I’ve noticed that what Jesus required of people was customized to fit their particular weakness. Apparently this man’s attachment to his possessions kept him from connecting with his neighbor, his God and following the way of Jesus. What this rich man needed was to let go of some things so that he could be free to follow Jesus.

But, this demand was too much. He was shocked by what Jesus had to say.

And he left. He left depressed.

## SHOCKING WORDS

After all those years people are still shocked by what Jesus has to say this rich man. I was a bit under the weather this week and didn't get to have my usual Bible studies, but I know what we would have talked about.

We would have talked about the fact that the words of Jesus in this passage are shocking, depressing and unrealistic. Like the disciples we would have asked Jesus, "If this guy who is an amazing combination of Bill Gates and Billy Graham can't be saved then who can be saved?"

Some preachers use this passage as an excuse to launch into a political diatribe against the rich, but there is no indication in this passage that this rich man's gains were ill gotten. In fact since the Scripture tells us that Jesus looked at this man and loved him it suggests that he really was a good man. Maybe he was rich because he worked hard and did the right thing.

And don't portray this rich man as being filled with pride. How did he come to Jesus? He came on his knees. He is a sincerely devout man whose spiritual instincts tell him that there is something more out there.

He asks Jesus about this something more, but for him it is something more to be added to what he already has. It never occurred to him that sometimes less is more. Sometimes in order to follow Jesus we have to leave something behind.

This particular rich man was challenged to leave his wealth behind in order to follow Jesus. And he couldn't do it. His sense of security and identity were too deeply ingrained in the things that he owned.

## WHO CAN BE SAVED?

The disciples are also deeply perplexed. Like most of society they believe that salvation depends upon doing the right thing and a sign of God's blessing is being a wealthy person. If this guy can't find salvation who can?

And Jesus replied, "You're right. Salvation is an impossible goal. It's easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to make it into heaven." This means exactly what it sounds like. Just as it is impossible to fit a huge camel through the eye of a sewing needle so it is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven.

But, isn't that true for all of us? We can't make it into heaven on our own either. All of us are bloated by our

desires and needs. No matter how good we are or how much money we honestly make it just won't be enough.

Entering God's kingdom will always take more than we have, and accepting that fact is the beginning of spiritual wisdom.

We might not be able to make it into heaven on our own. But, as Jesus tells us in this passage, "with God all things are possible." (Mark 10:27)

## GIVING UP SOMETHING

The God who made heaven and earth can remake us. But, it requires us to trust in Jesus more than we trust in our own abilities. And this requires us to give something up.

I don't know what you need to give up in your life. Some of us might be like the rich man. Maybe we need to give up some of our money and do what our money says, "In God we trust." Some of us might need to give up other things, things like pride or fear or our mindless addictions.

This giving up in order to follow Jesus is not a once and done thing. It is a daily discipline.

Notice in our passage for today that Peter remarks that they, that is the disciples, had given up everything to follow Jesus. But, Peter seems to be saying it more out of fear than faith. He is saying,

“Lord, I understand the worries of that rich man. We’ve left everything to follow you, and right now things don’t look so good. We’re on the road to Jerusalem, and you’ve already told us that there’s a cross waiting for us there.”

## THE REWARD

And Jesus replies “Don’t worry Peter. There is a reward for following me. Everything you have left behind for my sake and for the gospel will be replenished. If you left your home, you will be given a new home. If you left your family you will be given a new family.”

Isn’t that what the kingdom of God is all about ... creating a larger family in God’s name? That’s why Jesus challenged the rich man to give his money to the poor. It was a way to increase his family.

In the book of Acts we see that under the influence of the Spirit those early Christians did this very thing. In a time of famine the richer Christians sold what they had and shared it with those who were in need.

But, notice that they didn't do it because someone forced them to do it. They did it because they had a loving relationship with each other. They cared about each other and helped each other because they had been miraculously changed by the Spirit of God.

What was once impossible was now a reality. In the new community of faith rich and poor, slave and free, men and women all shared their life together. And it was this shared life that initially attracted so many to the Christian way. All sorts of people found that their desire for something more, that their desire for something eternal was filled by this experience of Christian community.

## TREASURE IN HEAVEN

This past year has exposed the fact that if the god in whom we trust is money, then that god is not very reliable. In an instant our nest egg, our source of security can be raided. There is more than one way to corrupt the treasure that we hold so dear.

And that's why Jesus wanted the rich man to sell his possessions and give them to the poor. He wanted him to have "treasure in heaven." He wanted him to invest in something that would pay real dividends and not just make false promises.

And Jesus wants us to do the same thing.

Just as he did with that rich man long ago Jesus looks at us and loves us. The Bible tells us that Jesus wants us to have a life that is abundant and full. And sometimes that means taking something out of our life so that we can receive something that is even better.

Sometimes that means giving something away that is holding us back. We who have so much tend to look upon this as bad news. We are perplexed and dismayed by what Jesus has to say.

## GOOD NEWS FOR SEEKERS

But, is it possible that this call to give is actually good news?

I think that many of us here today are like this rich man. We are seekers. Even though we have tried to do the right thing and manage what we have effectively we somehow know deep down inside that what we have and who we are is not enough. We know that there is something more to life and are desperately seeking that something more.

We come running to Jesus, fall at his feet and desperately seeking the eternal life that begins here and now.

We are like the rich man in other ways as well. Jesus tells us that our life is more than the trophies that we collect and the money that's in our bank account.

In our hearts we know he's right. But, instead of acting upon this we stick with the same old way of life. We go back to the familiar way instead of accepting Jesus' challenge to live in a new way.

Princess Diana once said,

“They say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?”

I suspect most of us would like to compromise when it comes to this passage. There is something frightening about turning our whole life over to Jesus so we want to give him just a little bit of our lives.

We would gladly settle for being moderately rich and moody instead of poor and happy.

But, don't misunderstand.

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

You miss the point of this passage if you think that it's just about money. The poor are not necessarily happy and the rich are not necessarily unhappy.

This passage is about turning our whole life over to Jesus unconditionally here and now. This passage is about going wherever he leads because we believe that in the end the path will lead to our true home.

No wonder we find this a difficult passage to hear. There is a part of us that always wants to be safe. And yet there is also a part of us who grieves our lack of courage. We want eternal life, but we are bogged down by the tyranny of the mundane.

The fact of the matter is this. Many of the things that occupy our attention in life are, in the grand scheme of things, not that important. The things that we treasure are not really treasures at all but fool's gold.

That's why Jesus said that it was important to search for that one pearl of great price, that one thing in life that matters more than anything else.

That's what the rich man was looking for and that's what we need to look for as well. What is that pearl? What is that real treasure that surpasses all others? What is the one thing that is secure in this life?

It is God's grace.

Nothing in this world is secure except the hope for salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ. And if our ultimate loyalty is to someone or something else, then we too will go away grieving. We will be sad.

## THE REST OF THE STORY

I wonder if this was really the end of the story. I wonder if perhaps in the days that followed this man might have re-thought his decision and made the necessary leap of faith and personal sacrifice required to follow Jesus.

And I wonder if this is the end of our story.

Will we keep on with a life that is not what it should be or will we seek something more, something greater? Maybe we too might find the courage to re-think our lives and listen to that same call to come and follow Jesus.

The choice is ours. Will we respond with joy or will we walk away grieving?

William Willimon tells of leading a Bible study with some students at Duke University. He wrote,

One night, in a college dormitory Bible study I presented this same story of Jesus and the rich man, just as I've presented it to you. I then asked the gathered students, "What do you make of this story?"

One of the students asked, "Had Jesus ever met this man before?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because Jesus seems to have lots of faith in him. He demands something risky, something radical of him. I wonder if Jesus knew this man had a gift for risky, radical response.

In my experience, a professor only demands the best from students that the professor thinks are the smartest, best students. I wonder what there was about this man that made Jesus have so much faith he could really be a disciple."

Wow. Didn't think about that.

Another student said thoughtfully, "I wish Jesus would ask something like this of me. My parents totally control my life just because they are paying all my bills. And I complain about them calling the shots, but I am so tied to all this stuff I don't think I could ever break free.

But maybe Jesus thinks otherwise."

Willimon said, “I was astounded. What I had heard as severe, demanding BAD news, these students heard as gracious, GOOD news.”

Jesus still invites people to be his disciples, and he does it out of love. Out of love Jesus calls us today to follow him unconditionally.

Jesus still says,  
“Break free! Let go of your stuff! Follow me! I believe you can do it!”

And that is the Good News; that is the Gospel in today’s lesson.

Amen.