

Introduction to the Scripture:

Jesus has been teaching his disciples about what is most valued in God's eyes. Today we see Jesus in a conversation with a rich man, who knows what God expects of him but is blinded by his wealth and unable to see the true treasure of the call to follow Jesus. Jesus brings his message home to the disciples in a way that is surprising but unforgettable. Mark chapter 10, verses 17-31:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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."

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

"Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with

persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

SERMON **Following Jesus**

Wouldn't it be cool to meet Jesus? I really do wonder what it'd be like. What he'd say to me. What he'd be pleased with me for. What he'd suggest needs improvement or correction. What he'd suggest I hold on to, or let go of.

Well today is our lucky day - because our lesson in Mark today says a lot about this. It begins with a rich man (we're told elsewhere that he is a ruler and he is young) coming to Jesus and asking what seems to be a simple question. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Which is an understandable question for this man to be asking. Back then, it was a popular belief that prosperity was a sign of God's favor. Being wealthy was a sign of being a good person.

Well, in just a few short verses, Jesus turns this notion upside down.

I think this is one of the sadder conversations anyone has with Jesus in the Bible. Not because of the seemingly harsh response from Jesus, but because this is the only time we hear of somebody who **refuses to follow Jesus**.

Those who did follow Jesus are household names today: James, Peter John, Mary, Martha, even Judas. But this man remains nameless.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" he asks. And Jesus responds with a much bigger answer than I think he expected.

After all this is a man who can afford the luxury of asking questions about the good life to come, because he doesn't have to worry about the life he already has. His mortgage is paid off. He has no debt. His portfolio is overflowing. He is secure in the knowledge that he has everything he needs in his daily life, and so his attentions turn to eternal life.

And he exhibits one of the greatest **misconceptions about inheriting eternal life**.

That someday, somehow, we can be good enough to earn it.

Jesus reminds him of law, listing six of the Ten Commandments and asks if he's kept them. "I've done all that," he replies.

And this is where our notions of goodness and Jesus' differ. Jesus says earlier that only God is good. And in saying that, he sets a standard which we'll never meet. Because, if only God is good, how will we ever achieve goodness? How will we ever know what is good enough?

And so Jesus looks upon him with love – scripture tells us – and says, “Sell all you have, give it to the poor and come and follow me!” And the man turns and walks away sad.

The man, who seemingly wanted treasure in heaven so much, walks away from the ONE person who is handing it to him! Jesus showed him the key to his salvation, and the man said, “no.” His material wealth was too important to him. He could not give it up.

And you know, Jesus knows he's asking the impossible. We **can't** do this sort of thing on our own strength. But still, he asks the impossible anyway – to make the more important point:

He wants us to rely on Him.

And all this makes the disciples nervous – understandably. If you cannot be good enough or rich enough to inherit the kingdom of God then who can be saved?

The point that Jesus is making and that the disciples are beginning to get, is that it is impossible for even very upstanding men and women to earn their way to life with God or to save themselves. And, if it is impossible for us to do any of this ourselves, then we must look somewhere else for the source of our salvation.

And people look all sorts of places for salvation. Some never get beyond material possessions or occupational accomplishments. Others look to philosophies or the latest trend in self-care.

But for Christians the source is clear. **Only by grace through faith** in Jesus Christ as Lord of the universe and our individual lives can we receive the gift of life with God - both in our daily lives here and now, as well as after our daily lives here and now.

“With humans this is impossible, but not with God;” Jesus says, “all things are possible with God.”

The bad news is that you and I can never be good enough or rich enough to inherit eternal life. The good news is that you and I can never be good enough or rich enough to inherit eternal life – but that God has made it possible for us through Him.

And it's all in the word *inherit*. An inheritance is not an achievement or a goal or anything we can accomplish ourselves. It is pure gift. It comes from a place completely outside of us and at the generosity of someone else.

Eternal life is just this – a free gift – just waiting to be accepted. This is why we can sell everything and still have exactly what we need to receive eternal life – nothing.

I think the key in all this though, is not so much the selling all (although that is important – to find what is in the way of our relationship to God and to work at getting rid of it). But I think the key is the “follow me.”

And following isn’t always the easiest way to go.

The story goes of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application that asked, “Are you a leader?” Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, “No,” and submitted the application, expecting the worst.

To her surprise, she received this response from the college:

Dear Applicant: A study of the applications received reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower.

Are you willing to follow? To follow Jesus that is? What changes in your life would occur if you were to make your relationship with God and Jesus the most important thing in your life?

Perhaps we don’t have the vast material wealth the young man in our lesson today has. Perhaps we do. Either way, the point is that when we ask Jesus what must we do to inherit eternal life, what must we do to gain a closer relationship with God, what must we do to improve our spiritual lives, Jesus is saying that we must examine our own lives and identify the things which are keeping us distant from or apart from God.

It’s like the child whose hand is stuck in a vase and the parent is trying to help the child pull their hand out. “Would it be easier,” the child asks, “if I let go of the penny?”

That’s what being a disciple is all about. Being willing to let go of whatever is keeping you from getting your hand out of the vase.

I’ve had a piece of paper taped to my desk for the past 28 years or so which is entitled:

Marks of the Disciple of the Future (there are 5). (Dr. Timothy Lull)

- Basic competence in the faith
- A personal spirituality
- A strong sense of how God has called you to live out your life
- A great love for the mission and the outreach of the church and the willingness to do what’s in your power to help that effort
- Be a person whose confidence is in God rather than the church

Listen again with yourself in mind... Do those 5 characteristics describe you? Are you growing in the direction of a disciple of the future?

But the lesson isn't over yet. There is still the last paragraph, in which Jesus says,

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, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (v.29-31)

We are left with a promise and what sounds like a riddle. The promise declares that any sacrifice we make in following Christ - whether monetary, or material or relational - will pale in comparison to the blessings that will follow.

And closing with the mysterious statement "The first will be last and the last first" challenges the world's system of success and achievement and leaves us pondering the values of God's ways rather than the world's or even our own.

I think that what Jesus asks might be even more radical today than it was the day he spoke it. For how can we do what he asks? Surrender everything? Give it all up to follow Jesus into a world where only God is certain?

Another way to think of this is to imagine a **trapeze artist** who swings from her high platform at one end of the circus tent toward the center of the tent where her "catcher" meets her. If she lets go of the bar, and allows the catcher to grab her wrists, she will swing in a long, graceful arc to that high platform at the other end of the tent. But if she doesn't let go of the bar, she will swing in shorter and shorter arcs until she stops and drops to the net below.

To get from one side of the tent to the other the trapeze artist must trust her catcher and let go of the trapeze. This is where the rich young ruler and we struggle. *Good teacher, what must we do to inherit eternal life?* Jesus says, **Go, sell, give, come, follow**. In other words, if you want to get to the other side of the tent - to that side of the tent where life with God is - you are going to have to trust your catcher and let go of the bar.

Jesus calls us to let go of whatever might come between us and our relationship with him. This is what following Jesus looks like.

Yes, it is a lot to ask. And understandably we share the disciples' confusion and dismay. But the truth is that this dilemma is the center of the Christian life.

Will we trust the security of our material lives and accomplishments, or risk accepting God's promises?

Will we make God the center of our lives by following Jesus first, or will we keep our faith and worship life as an extra, something we do on Sunday and at church, that we don't talk about with others.

And still we ask, "How is this possible?" And Jesus' response is the simple, and only, answer. "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

On that hope hangs our only salvation. It is the reason we gather for worship. It is what gathers you in ministries and programs here which wrestle with reconciling God's ways to the world we confront each day.

A man asks about inheriting eternal life and Jesus responds with a radical image of the kingdom of God. The disciples ask about being saved and Jesus responds with discipleship – follow me.

In the end, our response is that simple as well – either we accept the gift, receive our inheritance and follow Jesus or we turn with the rich young ruler and walk away sad.

Remember, what God is offering in Jesus is not achievable, but it is most certainly receivable.

Just let go of the bar - and He'll catch you!

Amen.