

The First, Last
Mark 10:17-31
Luke 1:46-55

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Mark 10:17-31

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?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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." ' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' 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.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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!' 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! 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.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' 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, 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

I told you last week that Lent would be a whole series on *The Values of the Kingdom*. The story of the rich young man illustrates one of those values, and highlights the difference between the Kingdom's values and the values of the world around us.

The rich young man comes to Jesus and asks what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus lists off the so-called "Second Tablet Commandments," those of the Ten Commandments which are about our relationships with other human beings.¹ The man tells Jesus that he obeys those commands.

Jesus loves him. Jesus is not just brushing the man off or trying to get rid of him. Jesus understands this man, and Jesus loves him. Jesus wants for this young man the best possible thing for him.

Jesus tells him that he has the letter of the Hebrew law down: now he needs to go to where the law is trying to point him. He needs to give away his money and his stuff, and follow Jesus. The man is shocked and goes away.

¹ The "First Tablet Commandments" are the first four commandments, about our relationship with God. The "Second Tablet Commandments" are about our relationships with other people.

We never hear about the man again. We don't know what he eventually did. I would like to think that he thought about what Jesus said, and then did exactly as he was told. But Scripture doesn't tell us.

Jesus goes on to explain that it will be hard for the wealthy 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."

Many, many people have tried to weasel out of this statement by Jesus over the centuries, both to justify keeping their own wealth and to avoid offending wealthy people who might give the church money. But it's all been weaseling.

The most famous weasel-work with regard to this is a story that was made up in the Middle Ages by someone who had never been to the Middle East. That story says that, in Jesus' day, there was a gate to the city of Jerusalem called the Eye of the Needle that was so tight that camels had to go down on their knees to get through, but it was possible.

Have you heard this story?

This story is one hundred percent fiction. It is not true, and, while whomever you heard it from probably believed it, they were probably not deliberately lying to you, it is still not true. This gate was never described anywhere, in Scripture or out of it, until over a thousand years after Christ. The entire wall around Jerusalem has been excavated by generations of

archaeologists who could have made their careers by finding this gate. They didn't find it. It never existed.

As much as we may not want to admit it, Jesus meant exactly what he said.

I know that this flies directly in the face of the well-known preachers of the so-called Prosperity Gospel. They teach that God wants all of Jesus' followers to be rich and to enjoy all the benefits of being rich, just like rich people who have no faith. They would tell the rich young man that the fact that he was rich meant that he was doing great, that there was nothing more he needed to do. No wonder rich people like having these prosperity preachers around! They tell them what they want to hear.

Jesus, though, told him differently. There really is a difference between following these Prosperity Gospel preachers and following Jesus.

At the same time, money is not evil.

Stuff is not evil.

There's a trap there, too. The Bible never said that money was evil. What Paul's first letter to his protégé Timothy says is that, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith."²

² 1 Timothy 6:10.

Money is a tool. If I have a brick, I can use that to break a window, or someone's head. Or I can use it to help build a hospital. What I do with the brick is not the brick's fault.

Where evil comes in is where money and other stuff becomes our goal. Where it becomes why we get up in the morning, and why we do what we do.

Or our money and stuff become what we rely on, rather than God. If we are relying on our money and our stuff to protect us and to make sure that we have what we need, then they are getting in the way between God and us.

If our life is about money or stuff, then our life is not about God. Our life is not about loving God and loving our neighbors.

Jesus sees that this young man does not have his possessions nearly so much as they have him. "Chronic affluenza," the condition this young man apparently suffers from, causes the sufferer to view the whole world in terms of money and stuff. It is a condition of the heart and mind, not the wallet. You don't have to be a millionaire to have it, and there are millionaires who show no symptoms.

People with affluenza proudly use expressions like, "A self-made man." There is no such thing. Every human being on this planet was made by God, in God's own image. The things we have, we are stewarding for God.

Unfortunately, people with affluenza lose track of that fact, because their view of the world has been twisted by this love of money and stuff.

Every human being on this planet was created to be in relationship with God and with other human beings. That's part of being made in God's image. People with affluenza lose track of that image of God in other people, particularly other people whom they see as being different from them.

People with affluenza rely solely on themselves and their own resources, whether that is their physical strength or their bank accounts. They stop relying on God.

People with affluenza start thinking of salvation as something they can do, something they can get, which means ultimately as just another asset on their balance sheet. That's not how it works. Salvation and the Kingdom of God are about relationships.

Our relationships with God are not about our bank accounts. Wealthy and important people who are used to the crowds parting for them and skipping to the front of the line through VIP entrances will find the Kingdom of Heaven ... a new and challenging experience.

That is how it is that, as a young Jewish woman of the first century said, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up

the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”³

Jesus Christ is God. He came down here and lived a human life. He used the power of God not for himself, but on behalf of others, healing and raising the dead. He refused to use the power of God even when it would have made his life much easier, and finally he allowed himself to be killed in an excruciating way, on our behalf.

Jesus is not impressed by riches or earthly power. (Yawn) He turned those things down in the desert.

Jesus calls us to compassion for those who don't have as much as we have. That's the behavior he modelled.

Jesus is not impressed by empty words. "Sending thoughts and prayers," is not impressive. Jesus never sent a lot of thoughts and prayers.

Jesus calls us to do things. We may not be able to raise the dead or heal the sick, but we can love the people around us and take action to make their lives better.

In the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims, those who are first in the earthly kingdoms around us, the self-important, the affluenza patients, are

³ Luke 1:52-53.

last. Those who are last in earthly estimation, the poor, the outcast, those who are more concerned about others than about themselves, are first.

The Kingdom of God has drawn nigh. It's coming, whether we like it or not.

We have free will. We can resist it. We can push back. We can hurt people in the process. It's still coming, and, in the long term, it is still going to take over the whole earth.

Or we can be part of the solution, loving God and loving our neighbors. Following Christ. Trying to live our lives like he taught us.

What's in it for us is getting to see glimpses of the Kingdom of God right here, right now. We can see them in the faces of a hungry child fed, a lonely person visited, a hurting person loved and comforted. There is nothing to stop us from seeing those things, except our own stuff getting in the way.

So, which Kingdom do you want to live in?

Amen.