

## Jesus, Little Children, and a Rich Man

Mark 10:13–31

Will you turn to Mark 10 please? In our Scripture today, someone asked Jesus the most important question he was ever asked: “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s the only time he was ever asked that.

Our Scripture has two stories, first Jesus and little children, and then Jesus and a rich man. In both stories we listen to Jesus teach us about who inherits eternal life. The little children do, and the rich man does not. It’s not quite that simple, so we’ll read what happens and what Jesus said.

You see, we ourselves want to inherit eternal life. We want that very much. We agree with Peter when he said to Jesus, “Lord, where else would we go? You have the words of eternal life.” So we’ll pay attention to Jesus.

### 1 Jesus, Little Children, and the Disciples – Mark 10:13–16

*People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for 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.” And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.*

First an explanation of terms: our text today uses several different terms to mean the same thing: “receive the kingdom of God,” “enter the kingdom of God,” “inherit eternal life,” “receive eternal life,” and “be saved.” In our text, these are all different ways of saying the same thing, what we normally call salvation.

What’s so special about little children? It says Jesus took these children in his arms. By the time a child is eight years old, that’s not entirely comfortable. I’m thinking not more than four or five years old. In Luke’s version of this story, they are babies.

Children, even two years old, are not that innocent. They can be spoiled and selfish. Jesus did not bless little children for their virtue, but for what they lacked. Children are small, helpless, have no power, and are often overlooked. They have nothing to bring or offer. When they receive something, it is not because they had any claim on it, but because of someone else’s kindness. Children can offer only their raw neediness [James R. Edwards, *Gospel of Mark*, 307].

The first beatitude in Matthew 5 says, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” That first beatitude puts the same truth in different words. The kingdom is for spiritual beggars. Almost unbelievable. The trouble is, my brothers and sisters, that we are happy to receive the kingdom that freely, and then act just like the disciples – reject the other beggars.

This will have been a surprise to the disciples. They thought Jesus was too important to be bothered by little children, who are normally overlooked. Jesus went after the disciples. It was not their only surprise that day.

## **2 What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life? – Mark 10:17–20b**

*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.”*

This man fell on his knees and asked the essential question: “*what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus objected to being called “good teacher,” which is a bit of a mystery, but then Jesus dropped it, so I will too.

“*You know the commandments.*” For Jesus, if you want to inherit the eternal life, obeying the commandments is a good place to start. We may get squeamish. It sounds too much like salvation by works. But Jesus often sounds too much like salvation by works for our tastes, so get used to it. Taking hold of God’s commands is a good place to start.

Jesus added one command here that is not in the ten commandments, and it is not in the other Gospels either. “*Do not defraud.*” In simpler language, “do not cheat.” Deuteronomy 24 says, “*do not take advantage of a hired worker who is poor and needy.*” In the time of Jesus, and always in this world, it is hard to become wealthy without cheating along the way. What did Jesus know about this man? We don’t know.

In any case, the man’s conscience is clear. He’s lived by this. He might be naïve, but he’s not arrogant. He means it. He has taken hold of God’s commands from his youth, and lived that way.

## **3 One Thing You Lack – Mark 10:20–21**

*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 possessions.*

This story hangs on these two verses. What happened here shocked everyone watching. Four things, in combination with each other, made this nearly unbelievable.

(1) There was so much right about this man. His wealth showed that God was blessing him. He was hungry for eternal life. He kept all the commands. Jesus looked at him and loved him. That doesn’t happen anywhere else in Mark. There was something very good about this man.

(2) Jesus gave him such a hard call. In spite of all that was right about the man, Jesus asked a lot. Sell it all, give it to the poor, and come follow me. Why did Jesus ask so much of this man? Why did Jesus set the bar so high?

(3) The rich man would not do it. Jesus told him how to get eternal life, and he would not do it. He had kneeled before Jesus, and then he walked away. His chose his wealth over eternal life.

(4) Jesus let him walk. Jesus did not go after the man. Jesus did not soften his call. He did not run after him and say “I’ll help you.” Jesus loved him, called him, and let him walk away from eternal life. I’ve heard preachers say he probably came to the Lord later, but that does not work. The way Jesus explains wealth and the kingdom in the next paragraph, this man is gone.

These four again: 1, this was an usually good man; 2, Jesus gave him such a hard call; 3, the rich man would not do it; and 4, Jesus let him walk away from eternal life. This combination staggered people then, and it staggers us now.

Jesus does not treat all wealthy people like this, not at all. Why did Jesus call this man so rigorously? Because, my brothers and sisters, Jesus knew that this was the only way that man would inherit eternal life. Jesus was not trying not make an example of him. Jesus wanted this man in the kingdom, and this was the only way the man would enter.

Jesus does not treat all wealthy people like this. On the other hand, this is not the only wealthy person that must do this to inherit eternal life. If this was the only person Jesus called like this, we would not have this story in three of the Gospels. Other good people will walk away from eternal life in just the same way.

If the Lord calls you to something you cannot do, don’t walk away. Don’t walk away. Plead for help. In Mark 9, a man said to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief!” Jesus worked with that. This rich man walked away. He had made his choice.

Let’s talk about the love of Jesus. Sometimes people say, “hate the sin, love the sinner.” Ever heard that? There’s some truth in that. When we say, “love the sinner,” what do we think that means? It usually means, “let’s accept them as they are.” That’s what love the sinner means.

Jesus truly loved this man, but he did not accept him as he was. Jesus hated the sin and loved the sinner. But he sure had a different understanding of love, didn’t he? We can hardly believe that eternal life is actually at stake in this choice; that’s part of our problem. A call that hard can be the only way to eternal life? Surely not! But it was.

Let’s ask this another way: as this man’s face fell, and he walked away sad, do you think he felt how much the Lord loved him? Did he feel the love of Jesus in that conversation? No, he did not. Did Jesus love him? Yes, that we know. Do you think Jesus treated the rich man in a loving way? Again, do you think Jesus treated the rich man in a loving way? Yes or no?

Our instinct is “no, that was not loving.” But we cannot say that, because we know that Jesus loved him. To follow Jesus, we must rebuild what we think “love” is. Jesus acted in real love. But the rich man did not feel loved, and he did not enter into life.

My friend Ron and I were talking about this rich man story last week when we spent a few days together. He told me that many years ago, the Lord said to him, “Ron, don’t offer me in a way I don’t offer myself.” That’s a good word to remember. Jesus says to us, “don’t offer me to people in ways I don’t offer myself.”

The story of the rich man has two epilogues. First ...

#### **4 Who Then Can Be Saved? – Mark 10:24–27**

*Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for those with wealth 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 a rich person 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.”*

A small point: “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” That’s just a saying, a proverb, that means something is very difficult to do. It is in fact impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. It is like saying that old trucks like mine are as scarce as hen’s teeth. There is no such thing as a hen’s tooth. Birds don’t have teeth. It’s just a saying that means something is hard to find. The camel and needle saying means it’s very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom.

The disciples can hardly believe what had just happened. Usually they say this, and then Jesus responds to them. This time, Jesus took the initiative. He did not wait. The disciples thought what happened to this rich man was astonishing and unusual. No, said Jesus, this is not unusual, this is normal with wealthy people. It’s very hard for them to enter the kingdom.

When the disciples are amazed to hear this, he just said it again, how very hard it is for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted to bring people into the kingdom of God, and for Jesus, wealth and possessions were his strongest competition for the hearts and souls of people. Wealth and possessions were the Lord’s most vigorous rival, his most persuasive opposition, for the loyalty and trust of people.

The disciples viewed the rich man’s wealth as God’s blessing on his life. He kept all the commands. How on earth can such a man not inherit eternal life? So Jesus used the camel and needle saying to tell the same thing again – how hard it is for the rich to enter.

Back in Mark 4, when Jesus told the parable about the sower and the seed, he spoke of seed that sprouted well but then thorns grew up and choked the plant. He said the thorns were the cares of life and the deceitfulness of wealth. The deceitfulness of wealth. Wealth promises life. It does not actually promise eternal life, but what it does promise is satisfying, fulfilling life.

We say, “you can’t buy happiness,” but wealth quietly tells us, “yes, you can buy happiness, you can buy a good life,” and somewhere in our heart of hearts we suspect that wealth is right. We believe we actually can buy happiness, or else something very close to it! And we want that.

Jesus spoke more about money and possessions than he did about love. Wealth and possessions are spiritually dangerous. The problem is not that they are dangerous. The problem is that we are blind to the spiritual danger coming from our possessions. We are naïve about how it chokes us. We need to say this of ourselves. “I am naïve about the spiritual danger of my wealth.”

In despair the disciples say, “who then can be saved?” And that is the right question. Now they are back to the children of the first story. They don’t have a chance. *“With man this is impossible, but not with God, for with God all things are possible.”* If the rich man had said to Jesus, “Jesus, what you ask is impossible,” if he’d said that instead of walking away, Jesus would have said the same thing. *With you it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God.*

Very briefly, how should we handle our income and possessions? Three words. (1) Live simply. As you are able, live simply. (2) Live generously. Be opened handed. Live generously. (3) Be content with what you have. Live contentedly. Live simply. Live generously. Live contentedly.

## **5 What Will There Be For Us? – Mark 10:28–31**

*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.”*

In Matthew, Peter says, “what will there be for us?” That’s not in Mark or Luke, but when Peter says, “we left everything to follow you,” that’s what he’s getting at. Peter begins to see what Jesus values. “So, Lord, we left it all, which rich man would not do. What will there be for us?”

Jesus took it a different direction. Peter was probably thinking about possessions. Jesus takes it to family. *“No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel.”* Jesus mentions seven items, and five of them are immediate family: brothers, sisters, mother, father, children.

About 6 weeks ago, Marilyn and I had a man from India at our kitchen table. He was a third-generation believer, and he told us what it was like for his grandfather.

His grandfather came to Christ as a young married man. That man lost his father and his mother and all his brothers and sisters that day. He had to move to a different town to be able to work. That was a common experience of first century believers, and it still happens all over the world, less so in Canada, but it is still common in some eastern countries.

The greatest reward, in this life, for leaving things behind to follow the Lord, is a huge crowd of brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers and children. One hundred times as many. We will gain far more family than we lose.

I say again, the greatest reward, in this life, for putting Jesus and the gospel first, is the huge family of believers. Because all these people are family, then we have access to their houses and fields as well. But the big family is the centre. And we'll get persecutions, and also eternal life.

## **6 These are Not Comforting Stories**

These stories in our Scripture have not been comforting. When Jesus was indignant with the disciples for sending away mothers with little children, the disciples were not comfortable. At the time they probably had no idea what Jesus meant by receiving the kingdom as a little child.

The rich man was certainly not comforted by how Jesus treated him, by that surprising and difficult call. And when he walked away, the disciples were not comforted by what they had just seen. Especially when Jesus made it normal for how it goes with wealthy people.

We are not comforted by what a hard call Jesus gave that man. We're not comforted by this call coming from Jesus's *love* for that man. This is how Jesus loved him? We're not comforted by a good man wanting eternal life but not doing what it took, so he walked away without eternal life!

People, the kingdom of God is for the poor in spirit. It is for spiritual beggars who have nothing to offer God in exchange. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* No one fails to inherit life because they are not good enough. But, people, it will cost you.

Following Jesus will cost us. We will need to leave good and bad things behind. Jesus is for the poor in spirit, and following him will cost us. So, why do we stay with Jesus? We stay with Jesus because he has the words of eternal life, and he's the only one. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we here are the poor in spirit. You have made that clear to us today. The disciples asked, "then who can be saved?" You said, "with God all things are possible." So again, we come to you and your Father with open hands. Do for us what only you can do. And Lord, wake us up about wealth and possessions. Don't let us be deceived. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.