

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Mark 10:17-31

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. 19 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! 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."

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 30 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. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

A father gave his little girl two dollars and said, "You can do anything you want with one of the dollars, but the other dollar belongs to God."

With joy she ran to the candy store. On the way, she tripped, and one dollar fell into the storm drain. She got up and said, "Well Lord, there goes Your dollar."

Yes, it's that time of year when we revisit that beloved topic of money and our stewardship of it. It's a sensitive and touchy subject. For some, of us, it makes us squirm in our seats. We might think it's none of anyone's business what we do with our money. But Jesus didn't quite see it that way. Jesus challenges us many times in scriptures in regard to our love affair with money and possessions and our spiritual healthiness. We can't simply ignore those lessons and hope to live a spiritually wholistic life in Christ. So here we go, headfirst, into Jesus' teaching about the great reversal we find in Mark 10.

In today's scripture reading beginning with verse 17, we read that a man ran up to Jesus and knelt before him. The fact that the man ran up to Jesus suggests that he was excited to see Jesus. We might be correct in assuming that the man heard Jesus teach some other time and was impressed with his teaching.

The man asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ response initially hints at saying, “Hold on, slow down. Let’s think about this.” It’s not that Jesus was not glad for the man’s question. Jesus always welcomed questions that might lead to greater understanding of God and God’s will.

Jesus then comes right back at him with his own question, which is something Jesus did often. Jesus liked to make people think, and he still does through our reading of the gospels—probably because most times when we stop and think things through ourselves, the answers mean more to us because they really sink into our being.

Anyhow, Jesus asked the man, “Why do you call me good?” Jesus told him that only God is good. Why would he say that to the man? Jesus is God’s Son. He is the incarnation of God. Doesn’t that make him good too?

Jesus was trying to communicate a very important message to the rich man. He didn’t want the man to think that goodness could be obtained. None of us can ever attain complete goodness because we are always on the journey of life. Each day is different. We encounter old friends and new people. Each day we are presented with diverse issues. So, every day we, as followers of Christ, continually work at doing good, but we never attain perfect goodness. Jesus wanted the man to understand that even he was on the same kind of journey day in and day out as the rich man.

Jesus continued with his answer to the man’s question by stating the importance of obedience to the commandments, to which the rich man responded with affirmation that he was obedient to the commandments and had been ever since he was a child. At this point, the man surely was feeling relieved that he was doing all the right things to inherit eternal life. He likely was feeling pretty good about himself.

Did you notice, however, that all but one of the commandments Jesus mentioned were the negative commandments—do not do this or do not do that? The point being that obedience to these commandments indicates one is living a decent life by not causing harm to anyone. That’s a good thing. But if we read between the lines, there was an underlying important question posed to the man, “What good have you done?”

Bible commentary writer, William Barclay, suggests that the more pointed questions Jesus asked this man were, “With all your possessions, with your wealth, with all that you could give away, what positive good have you done to others? How much have you gone out of your way to help and comfort and strengthen others?” He goes on to say, “Respectability, on the whole, consists of *not doing things*. Christianity, on the other hand, consists of *doing things*—not as an attempt to earn something, but merely out of obedience and love of God. That was precisely where this man, like so many of us, had failed.”

Jesus certainly was pleased with the man’s obedience to the commandments, but he wanted the man to move to the next level of his faith journey and become a disciple. Instead of asking a question that focused more on what he could get out of doing good, Jesus would have wished for him to ask what God wants to do through me?

Discipleship requires a spiritual connection with God who empowers what we say and do. When Jesus got to the bottom line with love and compassion in his response to the rich man, Jesus told the rich man that he was only one step away from happiness and fulfillment in this life and the next; he simply needed to get rid of everything he had, sell it, and, better yet, give it to the poor, and then follow Jesus.

Essentially, Jesus asked the man, in our words: How much do you really want to be a Christian? Do you want it enough that you are willing to give away all of your possessions? Sadly, we find that the man could not take that step. He seemed to say, I want it, but not that badly, so he walked away. The scripture tells us that Jesus loved the man, so we can only imagine it broke his heart to watch the rich man walk away.

After the man was gone, Jesus turned to his disciples and shared a learning moment with them. He said, according to the NRSV, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” In some other Bible translations, the words Jesus spoke, are more specific, “With what difficulty will those who have money enter into the Kingdom of God!” The word used for money is *chremata*, meaning all those things of which the value is measured by coinage.

We’re told the disciples were amazed by Jesus’ words. They were astonished by these words because it was believed that being rich was a sign that the person was a good person. It was believed that God gave wealth to the truly good people. Jesus, once again, was turning another Jewish belief upside-down.

To make his point clearer, Jesus said it differently, “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.” Jesus was not saying that the rich cannot enter the kingdom of God. What he was saying is how difficult it is for those who have put their trust in riches, rather than God, to enter God’s kingdom.

Jesus understood the power riches can hold over a person. He also understood how the power and desire for riches can hold over a person. Material wealth and the desire for it tend to focus one’s attention on earthly things, rather than Godly things.

Jesus understood that having money makes one think in terms of what money can get rather than thinking about the fact that there are values in this world that far exceed what money can buy. Therefore, the more one has, the greater the responsibility on how it will be used. Even more, no matter how much we have, the bottom line is that we have a responsibility on how we will use it. Will we put our trust in our money or will we put our trust in God? Moreover, will we trust God to use our riches for his good—for the building of God’s kingdom?

Peter then, after watching the rich man turn his back on Jesus, spoke his mind, as happened often, and said, “Jesus, we gave up everything to follow you!” Perhaps, he really was asking Jesus, “What’s in it for us?”

Jesus’ response nips at sensitive subjects in our lives. He said, “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.”

With his response, he was trying to assure the disciples that anyone who gives up something valuable for his sake will be repaid many times over, although not necessarily in the same form. For example, we may lose friends and family because we choose to follow Jesus uncompromisingly. But we may gain a larger family—a family of believers all seeking a sincere loving relationship with one another and most importantly with God.

In his response, Jesus was also being quite frank. Following him will not be without persecution because the world lost to sin will make it hard for us who follow Jesus. People won’t understand our willingness to sacrifice what we have to help others, including our wealth; nor will they understand our unwillingness to indulge in

what might look innocent and good—but in reality, oppose Christ's teachings. Persecution is emphasized to make sure we understand that we cannot selfishly follow Jesus just for the eternal rewards.

Then comes those all-to-familiar words spoken by Jesus, "many who are first will be last, and the last first." This is a warning against pride. If we judge ourselves by worldly standards, we may be sorely disappointed at the outcome we had hoped to achieve. The world's standards fall short of God's standards, and many of God's standards are the opposite of the world's standards.

We might judge ourselves to be on the right path, but ultimately, God makes the call on whether we are sincere and committed followers of Christ, intent on helping to build God's Kingdom and not the kingdom of this world. God knows our motivation for who we are and what we do.

Harold Kushner notes in his book, *When All You've Ever Wanted is Not Enough*, "Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so that the world will be at least a little bit different for our having passed through."

There was once a trusting abbot who was taken aback by the spiritual progress of a young disciple. The abbot let the disciple live in his private lean-to down by the river. Each night he would wash his one robe and put it out to dry. One morning he was dismayed to find that the rats had torn his robe to shreds. He begged for another from a nearby village, only to have the rats destroy that one as well.

He got a cat, but he found he had to beg for milk for the cat. To get around that, he got a cow; but of course, that meant he had to have hay. He got the hay from the fields around his hut. He had to get workers to help. Soon he was the wealthiest man in the region. Several years later, the abbot comes back to find a mansion in place of a hut. He asked the monk what was the meaning of all this? "Oh, Holy Abbot, there was no other way to keep my robes."

The more we are wrapped up in ourselves, the farther we move from God and what God wants of us. Every self-serving obligation prevents us from helping another, from being a part of the transforming of the world around us. God doesn't want to be an afterthought in your life; he wants you to love him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

Today's message speaks of God's plan of a great reversal, expressed through Christ's teachings and his life. It confronts us about our sincerity and motivation for following Jesus. When we run to Jesus with our questions offered in prayer, are we really seeking the truth or are we wanting pats on the back for a job well done? What are we willing to do with all that we have?

Are we willing to be Christians willing to do things without the expectation of earning a prize? Are we ready to accept whole-heartedly the call required of us to live according to the standards of God without compromising these standards with those of the world? Are we willing to give all that we have and all that we are to the glory and honor of God and our neighbors' good? Are we willing to be last in the world's eyes, to be first in God's heart? These are hard questions.

These are important questions for us to consider as we revisit our commitment of the stewardship of our resources to the church. Not everyone has a lot that they can

give, but all have something to give. Some may have less to give of their resources and more to give of their time and talents, which we will consider next week. For others, the reverse is true. For others still, there is not much they have to give in any of these areas and God understands that too. God knows all, including the motivations of our hearts.

You should have received in the mail a letter from the Chairman of Property and Finance Team inviting you to make a pledge of your resources to the church and its ministries. I hope that you will prayerfully consider an amount that you can pledge to the church, fill out the card and return it to the church either through the mail or by placing it in a sealed envelope in the offering plate. We have much to do together as we care for our building and as we fulfill God's call through the ministries of the church.

We are that larger family that Jesus spoke of in today's scripture and together we may appear to be last according to worldly standards, but we are first in God's heart and God's kingdom as we faithfully follow him. Let us make this be so. Amen.