

“The Rich Man and Jesus”

Mark 10:17-31

Sermon for the Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost 2021: October 17, 2021

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

Rev. Charles Westby, Pastor

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus is confronted by a man who has a lot of money. The question the man asked Jesus and the following conversation revolved around a certain issue. It was whether having money and possessions is an indicator of being in the kingdom of God. And there was a certain kind of logic going on with that issue that Jesus exposed.

The man started off the conversation by asking what he must *do* to inherit eternal life. The question was what he must *do*. It was not what he must believe or who he must trust. It wasn't even something like this: “Jesus, I want to know how to obtain eternal life. Please tell me.” If he had said something like that, Jesus would have said something like this: “This is eternal life, that you believe in the One God the Father has sent,” which means Jesus Himself.

But the question was what shall *I do*? In answer to that question, Jesus could only point to God's Ten Commandments. God's law governs our doing, our actions.

But here Jesus, interestingly, only mentions the outward actions relevant to the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th commandments. Jesus did this to set the man up for the 1st commandment, and for the fact that ultimately, the commandments won't get you there: but only following Jesus in faith; and following Him to the cross, to find there forgiveness and the gift.

But the man wanted to know what to *do* to get eternal life. So Jesus gives the man the answer from God's law: “You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not bear false witness,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your father and your mother’” (Mark 10: 19 NKJV).

The rich man said something that seems incredible: “I have kept the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th commandments from the time I was a boy” (Mark 10:20). At this point, the man must have been thinking that his having eternal life was a done deal; a cinch.

Jesus hears the man make his claim to have kept these commandments. Jesus looks at the man intently. It is like Jesus is examining him, and contemplating him. It is like He is gazing into him, or as the saying goes, “Looking right through him.” He is sizing the man up, in the way Jesus knows how to do and can do.

It also says that Jesus loved him. I'm glad it also says He loved Him, for Jesus sizing us up would be utterly intolerable if He did not also love us the way He does.

The word being used here is agape love. It is that kind of love that wants the good for someone else. It is different from that kind of love that admires and likes because the person is likeable or “impressive.” There are words in Greek for that kind of love. If Jesus had been “loving” the man with that kind of love, He would have never told him there was anything he lacked.

So Jesus looks intently at the man with this kind of love; the kind of love that wants the good for him; that wants him found and not lost; that receives him in grace. It is one and the same love as God is in His character when the Apostle John says: “God is love” (1 John 4:8 ESV).

With this love for him, Jesus must tell him the truth. And so He does. “There is one thing

you lack,” Jesus says. “If you want to inherit eternal life according to the commandments, then you must comply with all of the commandments: all of them. There is one thing you lack: “You do not ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength’” (Mark 10:30 NKJV). You do not “fear, love, and trust in God, above all things,” in the words of the Small Catechism (Martin Luther, Explanation to the First Commandment in LUTHER’S SMALL CATECHISM). So if you want to comply with the First Commandment and be perfect under the law (Mathew 19:21): “Go, sell everything you own and give it to the poor. And then follow Me.”

What Jesus knew about the man became evident to everyone. He was not keeping the First Commandment. We see this because what Jesus said grieved him. It grieved him because he was wealthy, and, as was evident from his grief over what Jesus said, he loved his wealth. He had his heart set on it. And he did not exactly relish the thought of selling it all and giving it away.

Then Jesus says the craziest thing, at first. He said a couple of things, but this is what He said first: “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” (Mark 10:26 ESV). That is to say, it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. How do we know that Jesus says this is impossible? Have you looked at a needle lately, and noticed the size of the hole in it that the thread goes through? Have you looked at the size of a camel lately, or let’s say a horse? It is obvious that the camel is way too big to pass through the eye of the needle. And this is Jesus’s point. It is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God on the basis of keeping all of the commandments.

The disciples thought this was a crazy thing for Jesus to say. They were astonished, shocked, stunned into silence. But then the only thing they can think to say is: “Who then can be saved” (Mark 10:26 ESV).

What were the disciples thinking? I should have thought they would have rejoiced in what Jesus said, since they were not rich. It does not follow that no one can be saved if no rich person could enter the kingdom of God. It does not follow because not everyone is rich.

There is something going on here in the disciples’ logic. The disciples are making a connection between being rich and being saved. The connection is that a person knows with certainty that God’s blessing is upon them and they are in with God by the status of their material condition, by the balance in their bank account, by the quantity of their material possessions.

There is a certain sort of legalism going on here that is deeply embedded in fallen human nature. It is a legalism that says if I do good by keeping God’s law in the second table of the law in my outward actions, then God will bless me with wealth. And if I have wealth, it is the sure indicator that I am right with God. That would be how it works from the standpoint of the rich man. From the standpoint of the disciples, it works like this. The man is rich. He must be good, because he must have God’s blessing in order to be rich. So the rich man must be saved.

Jesus shatters this logic. He completely reversed the tables on the rich man by pointing out to him how he did not measure up to the first commandment, because his heart was set on his riches. Jesus shattered this logic for the disciples with the saying about the camel and the needle.

But this is also an instruction for those who are not rich, or who would regard themselves as not being rich, like us. Money and possessions cannot ultimately satisfy the soul. And Jesus would turn us away from pursuing it as if they could satisfy the soul, pursuing money at any cost, as the most important thing. Jesus would turn us away from this because it is not the most important thing.

We give thanks that the saying about the camel and the needle was not the only thing Jesus said. When His disciples said, “who then can be saved,” Jesus also said this: “With man this

salvation is impossible. But with God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27).

The “all things are possible” here has to do with God’s grace to be able to save the rich man through the forgiveness of sins, to cover the rich man’s not keeping the first commandment with forgiveness. The “all things are possible” here has to do with the ability of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts the miracle of not having our hearts set on money and things, by filling the vision and understanding of our hearts and minds with Christ Himself.

But this is just to say that we are saved by grace in Christ, for our natural human hearts are corrupted by sin. And so our hearts are treacherous. And one of the treacherous things about our hearts is to be set on money and things as if these things were the ultimate good, the ultimate pursuit, the thing that will make us ultimately happy and satisfy the soul. But they won’t. Only God in Jesus can satisfy the soul and put it at peace and rest; and make it be at home. We need God’s grace to cover our treacherous hearts.

So, accumulation of wealth is no indicator of being in the kingdom of God, of being right with God, whether having wealth, in which case it would be a positive indicator, or not having wealth, in which case, it would be a negative indicator.

The indicator of being in the kingdom of God is Jesus’s death on a cross for us and His resurrection from the dead. We are connected to these things in His word and sacraments. And then faith in Jesus with respect to the redemption He has won for us and the final result of it delivered to us here: the forgiveness of sins and eternal life as a gift. Faith which says yes and amen to Jesus and thanks be to God for Him.

So what about the Christian faith and wealth then? God knows we need money to pay the bills to take care of ourselves and our families. So we need to pursue the work God has given us to care of ourselves and our families. The right way to pursue such work is to do what is right in such work, and then placing the blessing in God’s hands, as He wills.

And then it is to pray and seek our Lord’s help through faith in Him not to set our hearts on wealth and possessions. This is something we do in fact need His help with, because the human heart is naturally disposed to put trust in wealth and possessions and look to them as the ultimate purpose and good. We need our Lord’s help with this so we can care for our families and ourselves in peace, but also stand up for the truth and follow Jesus, whatever may come. For it becomes quite difficult, indeed, to stand up for the truth and follow Jesus, whatever may come, when our hearts are set on wealth and possessions.

May our Lord Jesus, by His Spirit help us with this always, even as He, in His death and resurrection for us, forgives us all our sins and has overcome the world. Amen.