

Money and discipleship (Mark 10: 17-31)

The Rich Man

17 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?' ¹⁸Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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; Honour your father and mother." ' ²⁰He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹Jesus, 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.' ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 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!' ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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.' ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

28 Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

(Translation © Lawrence Moore, *Mark for Missional Disciples*, Walking the Walk Publications, 2018)

This is *not* the story of the rich young ruler! In Mark's gospel, this non-disciple is neither young (as in Matthew) nor a ruler (as in Luke). He is a wealthy landowner, who has accumulated a large personal fortune – at the expense of the poor. He is addicted to his wealth. It is helpful to read this as Mark's midrash on the Parable of the Sower: this is the "thorny ground", where "the cares of the world, the lure of wealth and the desire for other things choke the word, and it yields nothing" (4:19).

It is also an incident that concludes this section with its narrative theme of "greatest/least – first/last" (see 9:35/10:31).

Most significant, however, is the way in which exegetes and preachers have wrestled

over the discomfort of the clear sense of Jesus' words: wealth makes it extraordinarily difficult – if not downright impossible – to hear and respond to Jesus' call to discipleship.

Class, privilege and self-satisfaction (vv17-20)

The action begins with Jesus about to set out on a journey (ie “on The Way”). Mark is dramatically ironic: the man appears with a theological question; it turns out that the issue at stake is whether he is prepared to follow Jesus on the journey Jesus is embarking on – which is, of course, the Way of the Cross!

1. The man kneels before Jesus – an act of homage – and addresses him as “Good Teacher” (*didaskale agathe*). This is a man who is confident that he has done everything that God requires (ie is also “good”). We should probably hear this title (very rare in Jewish literature) as flattery rather than respect: convention demanded that Jesus respond with reciprocal flattery. Jesus, however, refuses to play by reminding the man that God alone is good.
2. The man asks what he must do in order to “inherit eternal life”. Jesus then goes on to respond to the question (as opposed to the flattery of “Good Teacher”) by enumerating what God (who alone is truly good!) demands. We ought to understand “eternal life” here as “sharing in God’s Kingdom”, rather than “dying and going to heaven”. Jesus’ response is to cite the Decalogue – how God intends us to live together in *this* world. The Kingdom is *this* world, ruled by God.
3. Interestingly, Jesus inserts “do not defraud” into the list of the commandments! His point is presumably twofold: to flag that no one could have accumulated the wealth that the man had without defrauding people. And if his wealth was in land, it was land defrauded from the peasants. His second point is to make clear that the rich man is not “living right” – a point lost on the man, who responds that he is blameless before the Law!

4. Jesus' response is to *love* the man! There is a triple importance to this. The first is Jesus' compassion that yearns for the company and flourishing of this man, and pities his blindness to what really matters. The second is that Jesus is himself fulfilling the commandment to *love*, which is the heart of Torah and out of which obedience to all the other commandments follows naturally. And thirdly, Jesus recognizes the man's poverty in the things that really matter ("treasures in heaven"). Jesus loves this man who is poor in the things of God and responds with loving generosity. He will now go on to enjoin the man to love the poor people whom he has been content to exploit, and to respond with loving generosity. This will be the step too far.
5. Jesus responds with a 4-fold command:
 - a. "Get up!" This evokes the healing of the paralytic. Jesus is offering healing for the man's soul. It starts with the man quitting the game of false respect and worship, and doing what really matters – which is, in the eyes of the prophets, true worship!
 - b. "Sell that which you have" This is the equivalent of "Leave your nets". It is the call to abandon security vested in anything other than the Way of the Cross.
 - c. "Give it to the poor" Jesus clearly believes that the man's property ("possessions" usually referred to "property") had been gained fraudulently. He was therefore in violation of God's Law, despite his protestations of righteousness. He was required, therefore, to make restitution.
 - d. "Come and follow me!" The man had not asked his question intending to follow Jesus; he merely wished to receive Jesus' assurances that he was doing okay. Jesus exposes the blindness and addiction to wealth, power and privilege that is keeping the man from sharing in the life God has for the world. In calling the man to follow him, Jesus is flagging that it is possible to change, but that unlearning the old ways, breaking the addictions to wealth and power and discovering "eternal life" can only happen through a process of lifelong discipleship: "repenting and believing".

Camels and needles (vv 23-27)

Mark wants to make sure that Jesus really does mean what he seems to mean. So now Jesus takes the matter up further with his disciples: “I really find it difficult to believe in the possibility of wealthy disciples!” The disciples are puzzled and disturbed by what Jesus says. He then says, unequivocally, “Entering into the Kingdom is very, very difficult indeed! In fact, it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is very wealthy to enter the Kingdom!”

This provokes even greater astonishment: if wealthy pious people cannot get in, what hope is there for anyone else?

There are two things to note here. The first is that the disciples (in common with the teaching of the day) associated wealth with God’s blessing. Pious, wealthy people were therefore to be admired as people particularly close to God. The second thing is that Jesus is talking here about real camels trying to climb through the eye of real needles! To soften it by suggesting that it is a reference to a low gate called the Eye of the Needle, which could be entered by a camel only on its knees, is bourgeois nonsense.

Jesus is making it clear: the only way for wealthy people to follow him – to live the Kingdom out – is to redistribute their wealth. Jesus is calling for the eradication of class oppression.

There is another way that really works ... (vv 28-31)

According to the Parable of the Sower, wealthy people “hear the Word”, but then “the cares of the world (home, land and family), the lure of wealth and the desire for other things” choke the plant and it bears no fruit.

Peter remonstrates with Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you!” Jesus’ response is telling: there is no one who has forfeited home, land and family who will not receive back a hundred times what they have given up here and now. And when

the Kingdom comes, they will receive eternal life.

We are back here with the parable of the Sower. Jesus encourages his own disciples, and Mark encourages his church: however difficult and costly this new way is, it is the road to Life, because this is the New World that God is bringing into being!

Going deeper into the text (Mark 10: 17-31)

Mark's portrait of the rich man seems to suggest that he is "possessed by his possessions." Today we would call this the addiction of affluence. Perhaps it is because economic greed is the most difficult and pervasive of human addictions that Mark emphasises Jesus' love for the rich man. But love speaks the truth. "Recovery" from this addiction must be expressed as reparation. Few subjects in the gospel are as difficult to address, as is the subject of wealth. The trouble with wealth is that it is so insidious. We hardly know how to define it. Yet its pursuit is one of the primary goals of our lives, unless we take Jesus' counsel seriously.

How does wealth exhibit itself in our society? One distinguishing characteristic is the opportunity to make decisions about the directions your own life and the lives of your loved ones. When and into what circumstances we were born often determines whether we can make choices in life and if so, which ones.

Few of God's children have ever experienced making the following choices. Take a while to read them slowly and to interpret them in the context of your own life or on your family's life.

Have I ever had the opportunity to choose:

- where I will live
- how I will earn a living
- where my children will go to school

- what I will wear today
- whether I will eat today
- where I will eat today
- where I will sleep tonight
- whether I will have central heating or air conditioning
- whether I will buy medicines prescribed for me or my family
- whether I will make use of mental health or psychological care
- whether I will save money and how much I will save
- whether I will have a telephone
- whether I will have a television or cable television service
- where I will go on vacation
- how I will make my home or office more beautiful or more comfortable

Often it is difficult to differentiate between necessities and luxuries. Food, clothing, shelter, recreation, and security, for example, are basic human needs. But how we interpret the satisfaction of these needs in our own lives may provide contemporary content for this gospel story. Food, for example, was already explored in our reflection on "just meals" (see Chapter 3). But in a world where the diets of pets in wealthy households are significantly better than the diets of many children in poor households, something is terribly wrong. No one who has lived in a poor country can enter a First World supermarket without being overwhelmed with anger and sadness. Ordinary middle-class people in the can easily spend more money on a single meal in a moderately upscale restaurant than the majority of people in the world spend in a week to nourish their families.

Clothing also has a vastly different connotation for the rich and the poor. Is the breach between the children of God unbridgeable when one wears a £2000 designer watch while the other's feet have no protection from the bitter cold?

Shelter is another familiar sign of wealth or poverty. The countless homeless people against the people with empty second holiday homes. Affluence represents an enormous barrier between people.

Imagine a "stick figure" divided into two halves down the middle. The figure represents you. One side represents the "you" that is located in a competitive, consumer society, a honest "you" , that has worked hard to provide for your loved ones a reasonably (or very) comfortable life. This "you" hears Jesus' invitation to the rich young man as "not so good news." Reflect on this side of you, naming your feelings and emotions.

The other side of the stick figure represents the "you" that, like the rich young man, wants to respond. This side of "you" has recognised your participation in the injustice and in is readiness to accept Jesus's invitation to change. Reflect on this side of you, naming your feelings and emotions.

Wealth and poverty, however, are not only personal realities. We live in a world in which the vast majority of people barely survive, while a smaller and smaller minority live extremely well. Mark's story about the rich young man must also be interpreted in our own times as an invitation to transform the systems and structures that create wealth and poverty in our world.

Ched Meyers et al (1996) *"Say to this Mountain: Marks's Story of Discipleship"*

All age worship ideas (Mark 10: 17-31)

One of the keys to good all age worship is to keep it simple and relatively short. Ideally aim for a service of 45-50 minutes. That's not to say a service can't be longer but if you are thinking of 1hr30+ think carefully about your use of space and above all else be creative, take risks and have fun – partying is integral to the kingdom but we'll leave that for a year on Luke...

Reflections

How the man came by his wealth we do not know. That he speaks of inheritance suggests that he may own a family business that was built on the acquisition of land ownership, usually at the expense of the poor. He may or may not have worked to acquire the wealth but he certainly lives from the benefits of it. Alongside this he is faithful in his religious practice – he does all that the law requires. But it isn't enough. Something eludes him – the assurance of eternal life. By cultural standards he may consider himself in God's favour after all he had so much property and wealth but his visit to Jesus is essentially to tick the final box that will assure him that both his present and future are in God's hands.

The passage tells us that 'Jesus loved him' and his expression of love is an invitation to become part of the movement, to become one of the disciples. However there is a condition...to do that he must sell everything, give it to the poor, then come and follow.

In this instance there is no room for insurance policies, fall back plans or contingency funds – it is truly all or nothing. 'You can't serve two masters'...'Where your wealth is there your heart will be also'...

The man in his knowledge of the law understands something of the covenant relationship God has made possible but at the heart of the law are not simply rules calling for obedience but the principle of discipleship centred on grace. A Jubilee to be owned and lived out. The only worthy response to Covenant is to pursue it at the expense of everything else but the poor who should not only be blessed by that pursuit but benefit from it.

From a personal perspective this is to embrace what Paul writes about in Philippians 3: *Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ*

Ideas

Ask the question – how would/do we respond if Jesus extends the same challenge, as that to the rich man, to us today? Compare how many reasons and excuses we can immediately think of for not taking this literally compared to how quickly we want to say ‘Yes, Lord’

Create a treasure hunt around church using different Bible passages that speak about money and/or wealth. At the end there should be a ‘pot of gold’ perhaps a box of chocolate coins. The prize for the winner is not to keep the coins but to give them out.

Poverty in our world and our nation can be because of several factors but essentially it is down to those with the most seeking only to increase their wealth and not recognizing the God-given opportunities to bless and share. Richard Foster in his book ‘Money, sex and power’ writes: ‘Perhaps we need to stamp everything in our possession with the reminder “Given by God, owned by God, and used for the purposes of God.”’

Christians Against Poverty is one organization that is seeking to address the issues of poverty in our nation. Here is a link to some videos that can be used in worship
<https://capuk.org/get-involved/your-church/resources>

Prayer ideas

In your intercessions you could focus on how peoples internationally are left in poverty because they cannot gain access to available resources due to unjust systems, globalization or corruption. Christian Aid and Tearfund have great resources to help us pray and also to campaign and protest by peaceful means.

Liturgies and hymns Mark 2: 1-12

This is where you can find hymn suggestions and liturgies for use with this week's text.

This week's text lends itself to prayers and liturgy on a topic that we tend to skip. Namely money. So the following prayers about financial institutions fit well to our theme but may be very challenging for congregations.

Can I commend this website for some truly testing prayers on how we spend and use our money: www.thesanctuarycentre.org/.../written-prayers-intercessions-focusing-on-economic-j?

Prayer of resolution (inspired by Joshua 24:14-16, Luke 10:26-28 and Amos 5)

Leader: Choose today whom you will serve

All: We choose to serve the Lord

Leader: Choose today whom you will worship

All: We choose to worship the Lord

Leader: Choose today whose laws you will follow

All: We choose to obey the Lord

Leader: Today we choose to serve you Lord – with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength.

We choose to follow your law – and worship you in the way we know you require.

We choose to love our neighbours – even as we love ourselves.

We choose to reject the empty religion you despise that prays with beautiful words but continues to

Pursue self-promotion at the expense of the poor and the weak.

We choose to turn our backs on the gods of our land and our time – materialism and self-sufficiency.

God of the humble heart, the poor, and the broken – it is you, and our neighbours, we choose to serve.

Leader: Choose today whom you will love

All: We choose to love the Lord, and the neighbours he has given us

Leader: Choose today who rules your decisions

All: We choose to have no god before you Lord – come and reign in our hearts, our minds, and over our resources

Leader: Choose today how you will live

All: We choose to live generously – giving all we have to God and our neighbour – for the sake of him who gave himself for us.

For righteousness to inform the decisions of multi-national companies

Lord Jesus let your light shine

Into the corridors of power,

Through the closed doors of boardrooms and share-holder meetings

And into the cosy corners of power lunches.

Lord Jesus let your light shine

Between the lines of company policies,

Into the heart and motive behind multi-national deals and decisions

And throughout the negotiations for acquisitions.

Lord Jesus let your light shine

Revealing the worth of each worker,

Illuminating the benefits of your good practice,

Shining the pathway to righteous decisions

And prospering all who follow its narrow, and life-giving wisdom

For executives within companies

Lead all executives to you, our Father and their Father

For they do not know what they do.

Pour out your beauty, grace and love into their hearts.

Let them know they are worthy;

Let them know they are loved by you.

Let them know your graciousness,

Your mercy,

Your forgiveness,

Your kindness,

Your compassion,
Your love,
Your gentleness
And your honesty.
Let them know everything that comes from you is free
And requires no payment –
And that this is your heart for them, and everyone in their supply chain.

For tax reform

Maybe play a brief section of money makes the world go round from cabaret or the
Abba song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbdHevSRWJE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8P80A8vy9I>

Leader: Spirit of conviction, come.

Soften, challenge and speak

To the hearts of all who don't pay tax where it is due,

Robbing the poor

To increase their riches,

Whether or not they know just what they do.

**All: Have mercy Lord, challenge and change them to honour what is right, and to
protect the needs of the vulnerable.**

Leader: Spirit of truth, come.

Soften, challenge and speak

To the hearts of all who believe the lies of loopholes,

Fulfilling the law in its letter

But violating its heart,

Whether or not they know just what they do.

**All: Have mercy Lord, challenge and change them to honour what is right, and to
protect the needs of the vulnerable.**

Leader: Spirit of reconciliation, come.

Soften, challenge and speak

To the hearts of all who are hardened.

Loosen their grip on the riches they strive for

That they might prize the greater treasure of people's lives.

And of knowing what they do is just.

All: Have mercy Lord, challenge and change them to honour what is right, and to protect the needs of the vulnerable.