

October 13th, 2024

Mark 10:17-31 “The Rich and the Poor”

Last week we started a series in Mark’s gospel concerning what Jesus has to say about the Kingdom of God. Many of us are familiar with the Lord’s prayer when Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We recite that prayer quite a bit, but I’m not sure we always understand what we’re really praying for. Do we *really* want God’s kingdom to replace earth’s kingdoms? I mean, what if we’re okay with earth’s kingdoms? What if whatever kingdom we’re in is working out fine for us? What if we like how it benefits us? We started this series with the first 16 verses of chapter 10. In that passage, we discovered that God’s reign is different from any earthly kingdom or empire. In fact, in many ways, it’s upside down from our human understanding. We learned that the value and worth of human beings are different in God’s kingdom. Jesus said that in God’s kingdom, children are at the top of the list of who will inherit the Kingdom of God. But at that time in history, children were at the very bottom rung of the social ladder ... at least in Caesar’s kingdom. So, that means kids are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God *first*? That’s a tough one, but okay. We get it. It’s going to require a major shift in our thinking, but that’s fine. Let’s come to God with the innocence of little children, and make sure that we recognize everyone’s value and worth in God’s kingdom. In fact, that sounds very palatable in *our* time where children aren’t just commodities. We love our kids. We celebrate our kids. So sure, why not? Come to God as children, and we’ll inherit the kingdom of God. This series isn’t going to be so bad!

But wait ... let’s see what Jesus says about God’s upside down kingdom this week. This event happens immediately after last week’s passage about Jesus blessing the children. This week we hear about a man who runs up and kneels before Jesus with an interesting question: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus gives him the type of answer that you’d expect from a Rabbi – In a loving and compassionate way, Jesus says, “know the commandments.” Great

answer. We all know people who say, “You know, the problems of the world would be solved if we all just followed the ten commandments.” Yes, in an ideal world, that sounds plausible, but let’s face it – on a good day we manage to keep ... what ... five or six maybe? And this man’s response to Jesus is what you’d expect from a Torah-observant Jew. “Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth!”

Okay, I’ve got to take a break here and tell you why clergy are often reluctant to disclose our vocation in certain situations, especially if you’re going to be sitting next to someone on a 5-hour cross-country flight in economy class. Preachers will often break the, “thou shalt not bear false witness” commandment when someone asks, “What do you do for a living?” The minute you let the cat out of the bag and tell them you’re clergy, you can expect one of three responses: 1. A person will launch into a big monologue about why they’re not religious, how much the church has hurt them, how the church is nothing but a bunch of hypocrites, and why they think religion is the bane of human existence. And believe it or not, of the three I’m going to mention, that’s the one I feel most comfortable and equipped to deal with! But it still means “vacation is over – you’re on the clock now.” 2. Response number two, which is the worst in my opinion, is when someone says, “Oh really now? A minister. Hmm.” Then you discover that *their* vocation must be, “interrogator,” because they will bombard you with questions about whether you’re the *right kind* of minister. All of a sudden that 5-hour flight turns into what seems like a 15-hour flight where your orthodoxy and eternal salvation is questioned. 3. Finally, there’s the folks who go into, “Let me show and tell you how religious I am” mode. They start by speaking “Christianese.” And then list of all the things that they’ve said and done that will guarantee them a place in the heavenly realms. This is why often I say, “I’m a volunteer coordinator for a non-profit organization” or (my favorite) “I’m a metaphysical engineer.”

Back to the story – The man who approached Jesus said, “Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth!” Thankfully Jesus *was* on the clock and had a great response – “You lack one thing; go sell what

you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; come follow me.” Here’s where we discover how committed this guy is to his faith. Here’s where we see if he’s ready to live under God’s reign. Mark writes, “At that saying, his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.” Jesus took a moment and surveyed the disciples who were gathered there. Maybe he was looking at the expression on their faces ... reading the room if you will. Were they surprised that this guy turned around and walked away? Were some of them thinking, “Well, can’t say I blame him ... I’m not sure whether I’d be able to sell my possessions to give to the poor!” Then Jesus said, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God.” Children! He called them children! Remember, he just finished telling them that to inherit the kingdom of God, you’ve got to become like children. Maybe there’s hope for us! Then he says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” I’m sorry, *what* did he just say?

A lot has been said about this quirky little sentence. And let me tell you, there are quite a few metaphysical engineers out there who pastor congregations that rely on a small group of wealthy benefactors to keep their church afloat. How do you get around this story? And it’s not a Mark-only story either ... it’s in Matthew and Luke’s gospels too! Believe me, it is uncomfortable to tell the one’s you rely on to keep the church doors open that it’s virtually impossible for people who have a lot of possessions to enter the kingdom of God. So we preachers come up with all sorts of clever explanations that make this passage a little easier for our institutional benefactors. Here’s my favorite, and one that I’m sure I’ve used before. Ever hear the one about how there’s this narrow little entry into the city of Jerusalem called “The Eye of the Needle?” Legend says you *can* get a camel through that entry, but not one that’s loaded down with too much “stuff.” However, if you’re willing to get off the camel and lighten the load a little, you can still get into the city, but you know ... just don’t try to take it *all* with you. Sounds reasonable, right? Let’s do some fact checking. And yes, we can

do that here. There is an entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem called, “The Eye of the Needle.” And you might be able to get a young camel through this passage. However, this Eye of the Needle didn’t exist until 800 years after Mark’s Gospel was written.

Here's one that I hadn't heard of until recently. The word for camel in Greek is, “Kamelos.” But the word for cable or rope is, “kamilos.” What if something was lost in translation between the oral and written tradition? Maybe Jesus meant that it’s easier to thread a needle with a rope or a cable than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Because ... you know ... if you unravel the rope enough, maybe you can get a strand or two through the needle and everything will be okay? That one seems kind of far-fetched, but it still sounds like someone trying hard not to offend institutional benefactors, right? Here’s a theory that some people have a *huge* problem with, but it’s probably the most plausible explanation. Jesus was using hyperbole to illustrate his point. He was being funny. “Oh no! There’s no way that Jesus was being funny! He’s a serious person and this is a serious topic!” Yes, but we’re talking about the same guy who said, “Don’t try to take a splinter out of your neighbor’s eye unless you’re willing to take the log out of your eye.” There is no doubt that was absurd hyperbole designed to get a laugh. Maybe here, Jesus was just saying, “Our ties to possessions make it exceedingly difficult to fully understand God’s kingdom.” Oh, but that’s just too simple! Could be. I mean we humans are famous for overcomplicating things.

Here are a few things that we can confidently say about this passage: Jesus was saying that our relationships with our fellow human beings matter more than our possessions. This is a consistent theme throughout his parables. I think this parable is just as much about our *attitude* about wealth and possessions as it is about our actual physical possessions. Oftentimes our relationship with money is the greatest obstacle to living a life of full commitment and faithfulness. Think about how much time and effort some people put into the acquisition and upkeep of possessions! Whether we like it or not, what we own has a tendency to

define, or at least influence who we are. And I'm not just saying that because it's October and the Board is trying to figure out how much money we can expect for the next fiscal year and how we're going to have to budget accordingly. I don't want to be too quick to explain away the challenge of this text, but I also want to remind folks that with Jesus, attitude is everything, especially when it comes to our stewardship. Will we have an attitude of abundance, or one of scarcity?

So what does this have to do with "The Upside-down Kingdom of God?" That's what we're supposed to be studying in this series. We're supposed to be looking at how Jesus reorients our understanding of the Kingdom of God. The question that the man asks Jesus is, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" What does that have to do with the "Kingdom of God?" Well, the implication here is that if you are a part of God's Kingdom, then eternal life is one of the benefits. What is eternal life though? Oh, so then it's about getting into heaven. I'm not sure that's what Jesus means when he talks about "eternal life." Is it difficult to put others ahead of ourselves and to live completely in the Kingdom of God? Absolutely! I'd say it's against our nature. We are limited when it comes to evaluating the scope of our lives. When we are tied to our possessions, we only see life in a temporary perspective through the lens of scarcity. To see things in eternal perspective, we have to let go of our obsession with possessions so we can live abundantly. That's hard! Yes. But as Jesus says, with God all things are possible. What Jesus refers to as "eternal life" is not about what comes after death but what we receive by turning away from earthly kingdoms to the Kingdom of God. Here are some questions to consider this week - We know what earthly treasures are, but what are heavenly treasures? If you were to make an Amazon wish list of Kingdom of God treasures, what would it include? Restored relationships? Forgiveness? Love? Grace? The challenges presented to this man are also presented to each one of us. How will we respond? What are we willing or *unwilling* to sacrifice for the Kingdom of God and why?

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.