

September 16, 2018
Heaven All the Way to Heaven
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Mark 10:17-31

[The Rich Man]

¹⁷As 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; Honor 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.

²³Then 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.”

²⁸Peter 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.”

Power, prestige, and possessions: these three make a person rich these days. And not just rich – good. In our world, the poor aren't just poor; they are bad. They could be better, if they tried. But they don't, so they are a problem. Dangerous, even. A burden to be borne. A threat to be managed.

Heroes are not people noted for their fidelity or courage or sacrifice, but rather for their personal success, calculated by personal worth. A lifetime of personal success counts as a far greater achievement than a lifetime of public service. Jesus has something to say about this, friends, about what we treasure, as individuals and as a culture – a faith culture, that

is. Jesus has something to say about *our treasures*, about what our treasures in this world have to do with our lives in the next. If we have ears to hear him, life here can be heaven – all the way to heaven. Likewise, if we do not, there will be hell to pay, all the way to hell.

Interesting, isn't it, that the Bible calls him a “rich man”? It might have called him a pious man, a righteous man, a faithful man. He was all of these. Why rich? Because he never chose the treasure of heaven? In Mark 10 he comes to Jesus for spiritual direction, not financial advice. Jesus is a rabbi, after all. Not the chair of the stewardship committee (nobody ever called pledge Sunday their favorite Sunday of the church year). We all prefer that our religion and our money be kept separate. We all get mixed up sometimes. Forget that Jesus is God, Lord of heaven and earth – and every pocket, wallet, and bank account therein.

Like all of us on certain days, the rich man doesn't know what he doesn't know. He falls on his knees believing Jesus has the last piece to the puzzle of his life, only to discover his life is not a puzzle after all. It cannot be figured out. It cannot be guaranteed by following certain rules.

“Following Jesus is not a salvation scheme,” Richard Rohr writes, *“where Jesus pays off a debt on our behalf, to a peevish God who must be bargained into loving us.”*

The rich man asks for eternal life. But what is it that he wants? To live forever? Or to live differently? Jesus' answer goes to both: *Stop counting on everything you count on now*, he says, *and count on me alone.*

What's the best way to not count on money? Get rid of it? That's why I don't have ice cream and chocolate at my house – best way for me not to eat it. But I do have money. More than enough. Money I haven't given to the poor.

Like Final Jeopardy, which I almost named this sermon, is the invitation to bet everything on Christ alone. Sounds so good at church, but crazy everywhere else. Does the chance to have *everything* make having *nothing* worth the risk? Depends on where you start, of course. Some people on Jeopardy can afford to bet \$1. Others bet the pile. Thus, Jesus' metaphor about the camel and the needle, the most debated line of the story – but only by rich Bible readers, people hoping to give away as little as possible and still slide under the wire as *faithful*.

Generally, the interpretation goes, *“If Jesus can be shown to be speaking metaphorically, we are released from the commandment to divest completely.”* I've yet to hear Bible readers wonder, “if we can't give *everything* might we at least give *something*?”

We are dualists, remember. We think almost exclusively in terms of either/or. The rich man can only ask for what he knows the words for. He can't name what he truly wants.

You know that sensation, right? Being hungry for something you can almost taste. He knows what he wants is spiritual. He's waded in the ways of God enough to know that there are deeper waters still. He is ready to meet Jesus, he thinks. He is not. But no one ever is.

Nothing he has known or done or gained so far will make this next step any easier, the call to follow Jesus. "To leave everything" is how his disciples tell it. Everything. Not just money. Everything. Privilege. Everything. Everything this world counts as useful for becoming someone worthy.

Relationships, jobs, and houses. They are not small things in this world. They are everything we do to become our best selves. The Bible says Jesus looked at him and loved him, which I also get. As I sit and write this, my son reads me a list of personal qualities on which he must rate himself in applying for a job:

- flexibility,
- project management,
- analysis,
- integrity,
- research,
- management,
- decision making,
- technical competence,
- foreign language,
- physical fitness,
- oral communication,
- written communication,
- teamwork.

It hurt my heart and made me love him extra, watching him agonize with the pressure to please people he doesn't even know. No wonder the rich man is sad. *Sorrowful*, some translations say, which I like because it sounds sadder than sad. Is anything in all the world more disappointing than finding that your very best is not enough to please the one you most hope to please?

It means everything to me that Jesus loved him in his disappointment and his sorrow, that moment when he realized he was never going to be rich enough or pious enough or good enough to get from God what he wanted. Instead, he was going to have to let go of everything that had made him feel safe so far. And that seemed impossible to him.

Jesus knows how hard a thing he's asked of us: to trust that which we cannot see, at least not the way we see our privilege and our things, which we can flex at a moment's notice and change our situation. Yet, love us as he does, the Lord will not do business with us.

Come face to face with Jesus, this story says, and you will find out that there are no deals to be made. Not only are your power, your prestige, and your possessions not worth a dime to God – neither is your righteousness.

Who doesn't long to be loved for the good in us? Ben used to say, "*You are a good cooker, Mama.*" We'd laugh, but inside I swelled. I want to be thought a good mother, a good preacher, a good pastor, a good friend, a good person. Pleasing God and certain people matters to me. Religion has codified and spiritualized the human ache to be loved for being good.

I really, really get this guy. I am sure he probably wants to give away his possessions and hates himself for being too weak to do it. And walks away sad, realizing that coming face to face with Jesus is itself a kind of death, most certainly a loss. The loss of a worldview in which everything he thought was true, isn't. Enlightened by the presence of Jesus, not even words mean the same thing – words like "treasure" and "riches."

Treasure in heaven, Jesus said. How do you spend that? *It's harder than hard*, Jesus tells his disciples, *for rich people to believe what I'm saying*. Power, prestige, and possessions are the determinant forces in this world, actually and symbolically. They allow us to change our lives, just because we want to. Just think about how significant that is, how that separates us from most people on earth. To let go of the power and privilege and opportunity we wield, almost without thinking about it – it feels positively impossible. Jesus says exactly that. Humans can never do it. God can. In us, God can.

Like the rich man, the disciples have the loss ringing in their ears, not the privilege. *What about us?* the disciples want to know. And rightly so. "*We have given up everything*" – which is an interesting foreshadowing in the story, since so far they've given nothing compared to what they will. Jesus reassures them, "You will get it all back, in treasure and in trouble both." *Ah, that's not true*, I think again, remembering all the people I know who are yet to be paid back in either.

And I'm too afraid to call my own privilege "blessing." I've given next to nothing on account of faith – and yet. Yet I have seen and I have tasted of that life that money cannot buy. I know for sure that there's a way to walk through this world cut loose from its threats. Poverty and weakness are nothing to be feared. If we fail at everything this world considers useful, God counts no difference anyway: not between the rich and poor, nor the righteous and the wrong; not between the weak and strong, east and west, Christian and Hindu, refugee and citizen, sober and addicted.

All that counts is how we choose to live, once we've met Jesus face to face, once we've heard we have a choice to walk from here to heaven, loved for *being* – and nothing more than that. Would you pray with me?