**Uniquely Jesus** February 19, 17

Mark 10:1-31, Part Two

In Mark 10:1-31, two questions were asked of Jesus.

Last week we looked at the first question - “*is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”* Today we’ll study the second - *“what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Asking questions; being inquisitive… is a good thing!

But it is possible to ask the wrong question.

**Bono said: "We thought that we had the answers, it was the questions we had wrong."**

**Ursula K. Le Guin says: "There are no right answers to wrong questions."**

This was the case for the Pharisees who had come to Jesus and asked about divorce.

But here’s what we saw to be amazing about Jesus.

He guided the conversation with those Pharisees, asking the question that needed to be asked; and giving the answer they needed to hear.

Let’s look now at the second question. **Mark 10:17-31**.

**v.17.** Unlike the Pharisees who came to Jesus, this man *“ran up to him.”*

This man was on a quest.

He wanted to know how to inherit eternal life.

Most people never think of the life that follows death, until they are faced with a

life-threatening disease, or experience a life-threatening accident or have someone

close to them die.

And then for a short time, they question - what happens after death?

They wonder, “Does my life here on earth impact… the life that follows?”

“If I am going to live forever, how can I be certain I will live in a good place?”

What had precipitated this man thinking about his life after death?

We are not told.

What we are told in v.22 is that the man had great wealth.

In spite of the fact that his money made it possible for him to possess whatever he wanted, to secure for himself privilege, to experience pleasure and comfort, there was something still missing – something that drove him to seek after Jesus.

This man had somehow glimpsed the truth that life is fleeting, and he was desperate to know how he could obtain eternal life.

Ecclesiastes 3:11: *He has also set eternity in the human heart…*

Being made in the image of God, means among many things, that… we will live forever.

We all have a birth date – a day that marks when our lives began.

And even though all of us will physically die, our lives will never end.

God has “set eternity in the human heart.

**v.18**. As he did with the Pharisees, Jesus answered a question with a question.

Jesus wasn’t suggesting he wasn’t good – why do you call…ME…good.

There was a question beneath the question – **who do you think I am?**

Only God is good.

Is that who you believe me to be?

Why was this question important?

Because what Jesus was about to ask of this man, is something only God could ask

of a person.

**v.19**. In stating these commands, Jesus essentially asked:

Have you murdered?

Have you committed adultery?

Have you stolen?

Have you given false testimony?

Have you defrauded anyone?

Have you honored your father and mother?

**v.20**. This man had lived a moral life.

And yet, his morality, like his money, wasn’t enough.

**v.21a**. Why do you think we’re told this?

**Coffee/question????**

It is not uncommon for a person to think God doesn’t like them.

Jesus reveals God to us.

And we learn from him, over and over and over…. God loves people.

He sees us and he loves us.

It was because of love that Jesus said to this man what he did.

**v.21b**. “one thing you lack.”

For Jesus love was always the context in which he spoke the truth.

(Ephesians 4:15 – speaking the truth in love…)

**v.21c**. This is the only time Jesus told someone to sell everything and give it away

to the poor. Why did he do this?

In spite of “living the life” many dreamed of – the man carried within him a profound emptiness. The man sensed there was more – and he was right – there was!

But to obtain that more, Jesus told him, would cost him everything.

But not in the way he was accustomed to obtaining things.

Eternal life was not something he could buy.

It was a person he would have to follow.

Jesus in John 17:3 said, *“Now this is eternal life....*

 *that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”*

How does one “get” this life?

How does one enter into a relationship with God???

John 1:12-13 gives the answer: *Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in*

*his name, he gave the right to become children of God—****13****children born not*

*of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.*

The person who receives and believes in Jesus is “born of God.”

To be born of God is to be brought by God into his family.

Once a person is born of God, nothing, including physical death can change this person’s status as God’s child – they are forever in relationship with God.

But why did Jesus ask this man to first give away his wealth to the poor, before following him?

When Jesus questioned him about the 10 commandments, he had not asked him

about the first three.

\*You have shall have no other gods before me.

\*You shall not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything…

\*You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God…

Jesus’ statement, “one thing you lack,” identified what it was that held this man back from the life he craved.

Though the man kept almost all of the commandments, he hadn’t kept the first.

The man’s wealth occupied the place in his heart that belonged only to God.

At the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said*: You cannot serve both God and Money.*

Matthew 5:24.

There is room in the human heart for only one God.

The rest of Matthew 6:24 says this: *No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other.*

*You cannot serve both God and money.*

While some can hold wealth lightly, this man couldn’t.

If he was to gain what his heart longed for – eternal life, he would have to let go of his wealth, in order to follow Jesus.

This may sound harsh.

But Jesus never hid the fact that there was a cost to following him.

**Luke 14**.

v.26 – *If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.*

v.27 – *And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

v.33 – *In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.*

When Jesus asks a person to give up “something,” that “one thing” is whatever has

kept and is keeping that person from following him.

Please listen carefully – for Jesus to come into our lives, he must come in as our Lord.

Whatever it is that is at the center of our lives... when we come to Jesus, when we understand that ‘what’ our souls really crave is relationship with him, and release from the guilt of our sin, that only he can give….

if we are to gain him, we must agree to lay that “one thing” down.

**v.22**. The man had come eagerly, with anticipation and hope.

But he went away sad.

His heart was torn; divided.

Jesus would not be his mistress.

What would he do?

Even though the man went away, Jesus continued the conversation with his disciples who had been listening.

**v.23-31.**

It is hard, not just for a rich person, but for **everyone** to enter the kingdom of God.

It’s hard in the sense that a person has to surrender their independence; and admit their need; and confess their sin that has offended God.

But while it is hard, it is not impossible.

Because of what Jesus did, as he came to this earth, the destiny of any human being

can be changed. Jesus made the first move.

As Jesus talked with his followers he wanted them and us to be clear.

He is no one’s debtor.

If a person lays down that “one thing” that keeps them from him, what they gain is immeasurably more than what they gave up – be it home or family or employment.

Yes, Jesus said, there will be opposition, but that opposition can never take away the relationship you have with me.

Once you are in my family – you are in…. forever.

I believe this story was purposefully left hanging, in order to ask the reader:

what will you do?

Will lay down, the one thing, whatever it is, that occupies the place in your heart, that only Jesus is meant to occupy?

Will you give it up... in order to have Jesus?

It won’t be easy to come to Jesus; but neither will be it impossible.

When we move towards him, we find he is there waiting for us.

Will you come to him?

And what about those of us who already follow Jesus?

There is a “once for all” aspect to our commitment to Jesus, where we pass from death

into life, from darkness into light.

But the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in us, is a daily work -– as he teaches and leads us to keep on, giving Jesus first place in everything.

Don’t be surprised – the Spirit will take your commitment to Jesus ever deeper; pointing out areas needing to be changed and brought under his control.

Has he spoken to you about anything this week? This morning?

What is your response?

There is something else here in this passage for those of us who follow Jesus.

While Jesus may not ask you and I to give up all our possessions, he does insist that our possessions come under his control.

One of the ongoing, practical ways in which the Holy Spirit teaches us

(1) that we are stewards of what he has given us, and

(2) that we are to trust him in everything,

is by the spiritual discipline of tithing.

When we fast, we learn self-control.

When we worship, we learn to focus on God.

When we pray, we learn to listen to God.

And when we tithe, we learn to trust God.

God wants us to give a tithe to him from everything we earn.

He asks to do this, not only that we might as a church, collaborate together, to make a God honoring difference in our community.

He asks us to do so, because he wants to help us get over the fear of trusting him.

It is common to think – but I can’t afford to give.

And Jesus would answer back – you can’t afford not to give; regardless.

When we learn to give to God first – we learn experientially and prove that trusting God really works; that he really does take care of us.

I encourage each of us to invite Jesus to have his way in our lives.

Do you want to know him more? Than tell him.

Ask him to stir your soul.

Ask him to give you new appetites.

Ask him to increase your hunger and thirst for him.

Do you want to trust him more?

Than tell him that too, and be willing to learn trust, his way.

Welcome his leadership over your finances.

He has given you life.

And he has done everything to bring you alive spiritually.

Receive him; believe in him.

He is near. Turn to him. Open the door of your life to him. Welcome him in.

**Song: I Surrender**

**The Blessing**

1 Timothy 6:17-19

**Life Group Leader’s Discussion Guide: Mark 10:17-31**

1. When we think about people who are wealthy, money or possessions usually comes to mind. What other forms of wealth do people have that can hinder them from entering the kingdom of God?

2. Immediately preceding the passage about the rich young ruler, Jesus says whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. What does it mean to enter the kingdom like a child?

3. Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God. When the rich young man addressed Jesus as “Good teacher,” why did Jesus say, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone”? Does this trouble you?

4. After Jesus clarifies that God alone is good, He perceives that the rich young man knows God’s law and says, “You know the commandments . . .” and then waited for the young man’s response. Why do you think Jesus did not answer the question directly the first time? Why didn’t Jesus just say right away, “One thing you lack: go and sell all your possessions and give to the poor?” In other words, what is the significance of Jesus not pointing out this man’s idolatry right away?

5. Reflect on Jesus’ words in Mark 8:34 and Paul’s words in Philippians 3:7-9. What is the relationship between these two verses and Jesus’ command to the rich young man to sell everything? In all three cases, what is the cost and what is the reward?

6. What is God calling you to sell, to give up, to lay down in order to follow Him?

7. Seeing as we live in a very prosperous culture, it is important to be able to know when a legitimate pleasure is crossing the line to becoming an idol. The difference can be subtle and very difficult to recognize.

The following list (adapted from John Piper’s blog) is 10 ways to discern if something in our life is becoming an idol.

Read these together as a group.

Which one or two is most helpful to you?

i. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is forbidden by God. For example, adultery and fornication and stealing and lying are forbidden by God. Some people feel that these are pleasurable, or else we would not do them. No one sins out of duty. But such pleasure is a sign of idolatry. \*

ii. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is disproportionate to the worth of what is desired. Great desire for non-great things is a sign that we are beginning to make those things idols.

iii. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is not permeated with gratitude. When our enjoyment of something tends to make us not think of God, it is moving toward idolatry. But if the enjoyment gives rise to the feeling of gratefulness to God, we are being protected from idolatry. The grateful feeling that we don’t deserve this gift or this enjoyment, but have it freely from God’s grace, is evidence that idolatry is being checked.

iv. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it does not see in God’s gift that God himself is more to be desired than the gift. If the gift is not awakening a sense that God, the Giver, is better than the gift, it is becoming an idol.

v. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is starting to feel like a right, and our delight is becoming a demand. It may be that the delight is right. It may be that another person ought to give you this delight. It may be right to tell them this. But when this rises to the level of demands, idolatry is rising.

vi. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it draws us away from our duties. When we find ourselves spending time pursuing an enjoyment, knowing that other things, or people, should be getting our attention, we are moving into idolatry.

vii. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it awakens a sense of pride that we can experience this delight while others can’t. This is especially true of delights in religious things, like prayer and Bible reading and ministry. It is wonderful to enjoy holy things. It is idolatrous to feel proud that we can.

viii. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is oblivious or callous to the needs and desires of others. Holy enjoyment is aware of others’ needs and may temporarily leave a good pleasure to help another person have it. One might leave private prayer to be the answer to someone else’s.

ix. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it does not desire that Christ be magnified as supremely desirable through the enjoyment. Enjoying anything but Christ (like his good gifts) runs the inevitable risk of magnifying the gift over the Giver. One evidence that idolatry is not happening is the earnest desire that this not happen.

x. Enjoyment is becoming idolatrous when it is not working a deeper capacity for holy delight. We are sinners still. It is idolatrous to be content with sin. So we desire transformation. Some enjoyments shrink our capacities of holy joy. Others enlarge them. Some go either way, depending on how we think about them. When we don’t care if an enjoyment is making us more holy, we are moving into idolatry.

8. How can we grow in our desire to treasure Christ more, lose our life more, count everything as loss more, gladly pick up our cross more, and ultimately, live for the glory of God more and more?

9. What “impossible” thing(s) would you like to see God do in your heart in the process of sanctification in the comings weeks and months? What struggles would you like to see God change in your life? (Pray about these things privately, if you do not feel comfortable sharing them with the whole group.)

10. Jesus said to Peter in verses 29-30 that no one who has left houses or lands or family for His sake will fail to receive a hundred times more in this life, along with persecutions, and then, eternal life. These are amazing promises. Do you truly believe them? If not, why not? If yes, are you satisfied that your current life choices are reflecting your faith in these promises? If not, why not? What might you change in the future to truly live out your faith in these promises of reward?

\* http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/discerning-idolatry-in-desire

http://www.trinityefree.com/files/Mark%2010%2017-31%20Discussion%20Guide.pdf

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=402>

Nearly irresistible is the urge to soften this passage's demands.

That urge has been around a long time. For example:

An ancient scribe added words to make 10:24 read "how hard it is *for those who trust in riches* to enter the kingdom of God" (see the King James Version), as if the problem highlighted by the rich man is not being rich but putting faith in the wealth a person has or craves. This solution ignores the overall thrust of 10:23-25, where Jesus speaks quite plainly about the real obstacle that wealth presents.

A ninth-century interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle," through which camels could pass only if stooped and unladen. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed, and Jesus' words in 10:23-25 fail to recognize such distinctions about wealthy people's *attitudes*.

Countless preachers have told us Jesus omnisciently perceived that wealth was this particular man's special "weak spot," and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we *really* do not want to give up--only our aggressive driving or fried foods, for example.

Other preachers assert that Jesus only tests the man by issuing a demand meant to expose the futility of his supposedly self-striving piety. But such an interpretation makes a mockery of Jesus' love for the man (10:21) and the man's grief (10:22). If Jesus is not serious, why does he not chase after the crestfallen man, saying, "Wait! Here comes the good part! Let me show you grace now!"?

Jesus' explanation is rather clear: just as large animals simply do not fit through tiny openings, so the wealthy do not fit in the kingdom of God. Even a rich man who has successfully kept all the Decalogue's laws governing social responsibilities, as this devout man has, cannot fit.1

Instead of trying to measure Jesus' place among socioeconomic theorists or questioning his commitment to Protestant theology, we should note additional aspects of this passage, which beckon us to consider its nuances without denying its shocking message:

This is the only time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus makes such a demand about possessions. Although he calls everyone to radical renunciation (8:34-37; 10:28-31), the particularities of the call vary across the Gospel.

According to 4:19, wealth and its deceptions are not the only things capable of choking the word of God. Being rich is not the unforgivable sin; perhaps neither is it an entirely unscalable obstacle.

Jesus' *primary* call is a call to a life of discipleship, not to a life of poverty. His words *come* and *follow* in 10:21 recall other calls to discipleship (1:16-20; 2:14; 8:34; 15:41), and they stem from his love for the man.

In Jesus' context, despite the legacy of the biblical prophets, many people viewed the wealthy as specially blessed by God. The disciples call attention to this in 10:26 when they gasp, "Then who can be saved?" If Jesus has categorically ruled out the rich, then can *anyone* make it into God's kingdom? When we consider all that commends the rich man in this passage, Jesus stuns us by putting the kingdom of God so far out of reach. But, by contrast, this emphasizes his subsequent promise that all things are possible for God (10:27), a promise that will act itself out in the Gospel lection assigned for two weeks from now, the story of Bartimaeus's salvation (10:46-52).

In 10:21, Jesus does not tell the man merely to separate himself from his possessions, to burn them or to walk away from them. He goes a step further by instructing him to redistribute his wealth among the poor. Jesus calls for more than a change in the man's bottom line and more than a permanent relinquishment of his acquisitions; he tells him to change his relationship to the poor--to help them, to identify with them. This may contribute to the man's grief and apparent inability to do what Jesus asks. He resists surrendering not only wealth, but also status and power. He resists participating in economic justice and handing power over to his poor beneficiaries. The financial, social, and political costs are too great.

By contrast to the man, Jesus' disciples--despite their repeated demonstrations of spiritual obtuseness--have already renounced much of their lives, security, and identity. At the conclusion of the passage, Peter does not boast of his sacrifices but continues to panic about the difficulty of securing eternal life. What hope is there for him? In response, Jesus explains that he does not call people to asceticism, but into a new community with its own benefits. He reassures Peter that privation is not the hallmark of God's kingdom. Authentic community and care are the same kind of community and care that Jesus asked the rich man to promote by giving his wealth to the poor. Notice, in 10:30, that persecutions accompany such life; as if it were not difficult enough on its own, a life of authentic discipleship also contravenes the world's values and thus arouses the world's ire.

Maybe, then, this passage is not so unique in its demands, for it is not that dissimilar from others in which Jesus describes a life of discipleship, such as 8:34-37. The rich man's story and Jesus' hyperbole remind us that *all* aspects of what it means to follow Jesus rankle our deeply ingrained instincts toward self-preservation and security. Jesus does not try to deprive the rich man of his money and power. He asks for more. He tries to claim the man's very own self.

Jesus does this, of course, out of love. Perhaps he believes that wealth, like a competing deity, treacherously constrains people from serving God (as in Luke 16:13). Getting rid of wealth might then move the rich man to a point where he might truly be receptive to God...

...But, of course, there is a danger in following an interpretive route like that one, by trying to get too far inside the man's head or speculating about Jesus' evangelization strategy. Preachers do well to stick to the biblical text and avoid conjectures that make the rich man appear too different from most of us in church. Lack of receptivity is not his problem. His approach and words to Jesus are not arrogant or self-righteous.

Here is a deeply religious person so well-attuned to his practices that he can sense that there is more out there than what he has experienced so far. He asks Jesus about the "more," but his question focuses on what needs to be added. He seeks the limit, or the next step, but discovers instead that eternal life entails the surrender of one's whole self.

In the end, this story is untamable. That is, like a parable, it resists simple explanations and denies loopholes, making us so uncomfortable that we are liable to talk circles around it in hope of stumbling upon a basis for softening its message. This story, again like a parable, intends to be experienced rather than explained--experienced not in a simplistic manner or with a belligerence that violates the spirit of the narrative, but in a way that keeps a congregation focused on the real-life demands of discipleship, on the seriousness of the new community envisioned by the kingdom of God, and on the foundational promise that God makes salvation possible.

Congregations will hear this story in diverse ways, depending upon the social class and economic situation of individual members. Still, given our current cultural context, in which so much of our collectively ingrained assumptions about financial security have been uprooted and have further exposed our runaway consumption, people will have new ears to consider the gospel's perspective on discipleship, possessions, and abundance. The preacher's challenge is to show that the kingdom of God confronts us with a vision of life and identity quite incompatible with so many of our core presuppositions about wealth, prerogatives, and selfhood.

1Nothing about the narration or Jesus' response suggests that the man is anything but sincere in 10:20. Why Jesus replaces the prohibition against coveting with one about defrauding is a conundrum no interpreter has successfully solved.

<https://www.sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/mark-1017-31>

**Mark 10:17-31 COMMENTARY:**

**MARK 10:17-22. WHAT SHALL I DO THAT I MAY INHERIT ETERNAL LIFE?**

17As he was going out into the way(Greek: hodon), one ran to him, knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”18Jesus said to him,*“Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God.*19You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not give false testimony,’ ‘Do not defraud,’ ‘Honor your father and mother.'” 20He said to him, “Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth.”21Jesus looking at him loved him, and said to him,*“One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me, taking up the cross.”*22But his face fell at that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had great possessions.

**“As (Jesus) was going out into the way”** (hodon—”the way,” a code phrase for Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem) (v. 17a). Mark uses hodon to remind us that Jesus is on “the way” to Jerusalem and a cross.

Note the irony.  Jesus is going to Jerusalem to die, but this man is asking how to live.  Jesus is “on the way” to give his life, but this man is asking how to receive life.  It was only recently that Jesus said, “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; and whoever will lose his life for my sake and the sake of the Good News will save it” (8:35).

**“one ran to him, knelt before him”** (v. 17b). We think of this man as the Rich Young Ruler, but Mark identifies him only as a man who had many possessions and mentions his possessions only at the conclusion of this encounter (v. 22). Matthew says that he is young (19:20), and Luke identifies him as a ruler (18:18).

**“Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”** (v. 17c). The prize that he seeks, eternal life, is mentioned frequently in the Gospel of John. In the Synoptics, outside of this story (found also in Matthew 19:16-30 and Luke 18:18-30), the phrase “eternal life” appears only twice (Matthew 25:46; Luke 10:25). The more usual phrase in the Synoptics is “the kingdom of God,” which phrase Jesus uses in verses 24-25. The disciples use the word “saved” in verse 26 instead of “eternal life” or “kingdom of God.”

The man asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. As a rich man, he understands inheritances. The law spells out inheritances. The firstborn son is to inherit two shares of the property, and each of the other sons is to inherit one share (Deuteronomy 21:17). In other words, the firstborn son is to get twice as much as any of his brothers. If there are no sons, daughters are allowed to receive the inheritance (Numbers 27:8-11). However, in most cases, a daughter would receive only a dowry—a bridal present from her father.

This rich young man surely knows those laws like the back of his hand. Now he wants to know the law regarding eternal life—what he must do to inherit eternal life. What are the requirements? What must he do?

The Old Testament often uses the word “inherit” or “inheritance” in relationship to God and God’s people (Exodus 32:13; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 26:53-55, etc.), and the Israelites sometimes compromised that inheritance by their behavior.

**“what shall I do“** (v. 17c).  The man wants to know what he must do to inherit eternal life.  If what the man says in verse 20 is true, as might be the case, he is already doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons. He is less interested in serving God than in figuring out how to get God to serve him.

The man’s question also reveals that he has misunderstood the relationship between his own works and God’s grace.  He cannot achieve eternal life by virtue of his own actions.  He needs to acknowledge his spiritual deficits and seek God’s grace.

God has been generous to this man, and the man asks how to insure God’s continued generosity.  He is rich in this life, and wants to extend his prosperity into eternity.  His answer in verse 20 shows that he knows the traditional answer to his question and is already complying with traditional requirements.  Perhaps he is anxious to insure that he hasn’t failed at some unknown point. Perhaps he is looking for reassurance.  Perhaps he is just looking for a pat on the back—”Keep up the good work!”  In any event, we can be sure that he does not expect Jesus to lay a significant new requirement on him.

**“Why do you call me good? No one is good except one—God”** (v. 18). We are surprised when Jesus rebukes the man for calling him “Good teacher.” The man came running—felt an urgency to receive advice from Jesus—knelt to ask his question. Nothing in his manner suggests that he is being dishonest or is trying to trap Jesus. Verse 21 tells us that Jesus loves him.

However, Jews understand that God is good and avoid using the word “good” for people lest they be guilty of blasphemy. Jesus is, indeed, good, but he points this man to God’s goodness.

**“You know the commandments”**(v. 19a). We are surprised to hear Jesus connect commandments and eternal life. Hasn’t Jesus ushered in the dispensation of grace! Doesn’t faith trump obedience to the law! But Jesus cites five commandments from the second table of the Decalogue—and one that is not part of the original ten—all having to do with human relationships:

(NOTE: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews each have their own system for numbering the Ten Commandments.  The following are Protestant numbers, so your numbers might be different.)

• **“Do not murder”** (v. 19) is the sixth commandment (Exodus 20:13).

• **“Do not commit adultery”** is the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14).

• **“Do not steal”** is the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:15).

• **“Do not give false testimony”** is ninth commandment (Exodus 20:16).

• **“Do not defraud”** is not part of the Ten Commandments. Jesus substitutes it for “You shall not covet”—the tenth commandment (Exodus 20:17). It makes sense that he should do so, because a rich man is less likely to covet the possessions of others than he is to defraud people in the pursuit of further wealth.

• **“Honor your father and mother”** is the fifth commandment—the commandment with a promise—”that your days may be long in the land which Yahweh your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12). This is in keeping with the man’s concern—life—longevity.

The rich man responds, **“Teacher, I have observed all these things from my youth”** (vs. 20). Jesus does not challenge his answer. The man has surely been meticulous, and believes that he has kept the commandments. Note, however that Jesus did not mention the following commandments, so the man has not claimed to obey them.

• The first commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3).

• The second is “You shall not make for yourselves an idol” (Exodus 20:4).

• The third is “You shall not take the name of Yahweh your God in vain” (Exodus 20:7).

• The fourth is “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8).

• The tenth is “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exodus 20:2-17). As noted above, Jesus may intend “Do not defraud” (v. 19), to substitute for “You shall not covet.”

Commandments one through four have to do with our relationship to God. The tenth commandment, “You shall not covet,” at first blush, seems to have to do with human relationships, but consider again. To covet material possessions is to invest them with great importance—to let them to fill our hearts—to allow them to fill the God-space in our lives. In a sense, a violation of the tenth commandment is also a violation of the first and second commandments—making a god of material possessions.

So it seems that, in verse 19, Jesus listed only commandments that this rich man would find easy. The man says that he has kept them, and he may have—but commandments having to do with relationships to God represent a higher level of discipleship, one where this man is deficient. Now, Jesus tells the man what he must do to bring himself into compliance with the first and second commandments.

**“Jesus looking at him loved him”** (v. 21a). This tells us two things:

• First, the man didn’t come to Jesus, as so many powerful men did, trying to find a chink in Jesus’ armor.  He asked a question for the purpose of learning from Jesus, and anticipated doing what Jesus told him to do.

• Second, Jesus saw that the man’s heart was pure and felt a genuine affection for him. Whether he knew in advance how the man would respond is something that we can’t know, but it is quite possible that he did not know—that he was giving the man a genuine opportunity to choose the road that leads to life—that he hoped the man would do just that. We must keep in mind that Jesus “emptied himself” (Greek: heauton ekenosen—poured himself out”) when he came to earth (Philippians 2:7). While he displayed an unusual ability to read people’s hearts, there is no reason to assume that he was omniscient.

**“One thing you lack. Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me, taking up the cross”**(v. 21b). This is a shocking call to discipleship—especially shocking in a culture that assumed that riches constituted an endorsement by God of the rich person’s life.  This man has probably gone through his life believing that he has tried to please God and that his riches demonstrate that God is pleased with him.

This call is also shocking when contrasted with other calls to discipleship in the Gospels. In most cases, Jesus called people by saying simply, “Come after me.” There is no record of Jesus requiring the fishermen to sell their boats (1:17). Simon and Andrew kept their house in Capernaum (1:29). Martha and Mary owned a house (Luke 10:38). There is no mention of Levi, the tax collector, having to give up his ill-gotten gains (2:14), although it seems likely that he would have done so. Several wealthy people became disciples without divesting themselves of their wealth (Acts 16:14; Romans 16:1-5, 23).

Why then should Jesus demand such sacrifice from this man? There are at least two possibilities:

• As this story reveals, this man’s wealth is very important to him—more important even than eternal life—unless he assumes that he can obtain eternal life without selling his property. The security afforded by material possessions tempts us to trust in possessions rather than in God.

• Note too that this story follows immediately after the story of the children in which Jesus said, “Most certainly I tell you, whoever will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child, he will in no way enter into it” (10:15). The rich man is quite unlike those children. They were poor, but he is rich. They were dependent, but he is not. They had no status or power, but he has both. They had no security apart from those who cared for them, but the rich man is quite secure in his own right. Perhaps Jesus is simply requiring the rich man to become like a child before God—to strip himself of those things that provide him security so that he might find his security in God.

It is possible, then, that Jesus tailored the requirement to sell everything especially for this man—to meet his particular spiritual needs. We should not, however, imagine that Jesus will not ask something equally difficult of us.

Kenneth Bailey, commenting on the parallel passage in Luke 18, contrasts the “old obedience” required by the Ten Commandments with the “new obedience” required by Jesus: “In the old obedience the faithful were told not to steal another’s property. In the new obedience, one’s own property may have to be left behind. In the old obedience one was told to leave the neighbor’s wife alone. In the new obedience the disciple may be required to leave his own wife alone. In the old obedience the faithful were to honor father and mother, which of course, popularly understood, meant (and still means) to stay home and take care of them until they die and are respectfully buried. In the new obedience the disciple may have to leave them in response to a higher loyalty. It is nearly impossible to communicate what all of this means in (a) Middle Eastern context. The two unassailable loyalties that any Middle Easterner is almost required to consider more important than life itself are family and the village home. When Jesus puts both of these in one list, and then demands a loyalty that supersedes them both, he is requiring that which is truly impossible to the Middle Easterner, given the pressures of his culture. The ten commandments he can manage, but this is too much. Only with God are such things possible” (Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, 169).

**“But his face fell at that saying, and he went away sorrowful, for he was one who had great possessions”** (v. 22). The man was shocked at the price tag that Jesus placed on eternal life. We too should be shocked when we hear this story. The only cheap grace is for children who have nothing to give (10:13-16). The rest of us can expect Jesus to make painful demands.

**MARK 10:23-27. ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE WITH GOD**

23Jesus looked around, and said to his disciples,*“How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!”*24The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus answered again,*“Children, how hard is it for those who trust in riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!*25It is easier for a camel (Greek: kamelon) to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.”26They were exceedingly astonished, saying to him, “Then who can be saved?”27Jesus, looking at them, said,*“With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God.”*

**“How difficult it is for those who have riches to enter into the Kingdom of God!”** (v. 23b). Jesus states (verse 23) and then restates this (verse 24), perplexing the disciples (v. 23). They have been taught that wealth is a sign of God’s approval, so how can it be difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God? As he does so often, Jesus stands conventional religious thinking on its head—turns everything upside down and inside out. No wonder the disciples are perplexed.

**“It is easier for a camel**(kamelon) **to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God”** (v. 25). People sometimes try to soften Jesus’ words about the eye of a needle by suggesting that:

• The word that is translated camel (Greek: kamelon) should instead be translated rope (Greek: kamilon). The Greek words are similar, and it is easier to imagine threading a rope through a needle than having a camel crawl through the eye of a needle. However, the textual evidence for this is weak.

• The “eye of a needle” was a low gate in a city wall that would require a camel to be unloaded before proceeding on its knees through the opening. However, there is no evidence that such a gate existed in Jesus’ day.

Jesus is using hyperbole, exaggerated language, to make a point. He talks of the largest animal trying to negotiate the smallest opening to provide a memorable illustration of the impossibility of a rich person entering the kingdom of God. “To try to domesticate this language does Jesus no favor” (Williamson, 184). Instead of taking the image literally, let us take it seriously. It is a word of judgment, not just for that rich man, but for all of us who have many possessions.

The disciples ask the obvious question, **“Then who can be saved?”** (v. 26). If this decent, God-fearing, law-abiding man, whom God has blessed with riches, cannot be saved, who can?

Listen carefully to the answer. **“With men it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God”** (v. 27). Apart from grace, this decent, God-fearing, law-abiding man has no hope. Only by God’s grace is there any possibility that he can enter the kingdom of God. The same is true for all of us. Our challenge is to accept our status as little children before God, penniless and hopeless except for God’s grace. Neither perfect attendance in worship—nor service in high church office—nor ordination—nor tithing—nor anything that we can do can save us apart from the grace of God.

This passage also warns us of the seductiveness of wealth. We might imagine that we are in no danger because we are poor or middle-class. However, most of us are wealthy by the standards of most of the world. People who have moved in the past year will understand better than most just how many possessions they really have.

It is also true that we need not be wealthy to have our hearts and souls consumed by thoughts of money. We are all in danger of loving money more than God.

**MARK 10:28-31. LOOK, WE HAVE LEFT EVERYTHING AND FOLLOWED YOU**

28Peter began to tell him, “Behold, we have left all, and have followed you.”29Jesus said,*“Most certainly I tell you, there is no one who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or land, for my sake, and for the sake of the Good News,*30but he will receive one hundred times more now in this time, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land, with persecutions; and in the age to come eternal life.31But many who are first will be last; and the last first.”

**“Behold, we have left all, and have followed you”** (v. 28). Peter and the disciples have already done what Jesus told this rich man to do. They have sacrificed everything to follow Jesus. Peter’s implied question is, “Will we receive any reward?

**“Most certainly I tell you, there is no one who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or land, for my sake, and for the sake of the Good News, but he will receive one hundred times more now in this time, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and land, with persecutions; and in the age to come eternal life”** (vv. 29-30). Jesus makes it clear that those who sacrifice for his sake will be rewarded both now and in eternity.

We would expect Jesus to reward us for sacrificing bad things (addictions, bad habits) and seductive things (fame and fortune), but the things that he mentions in verse 29 are all quite positive. It is possible for even good things to stand between us and Christ.

The list of blessings in verse 30 parallels the list of sacrifices in verse 29 with one exception—the word “father” is conspicuously absent in verse 30. The Christian who leaves house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields gains access to many Christian houses, brothers, sisters, etc.—but there is no need for many fathers, because God is our Father.

Jesus says that we will receive rewards for faith in the here and now. Example: In the early history of our nation, the religious beliefs of Quakers caused them to be honest, hard-working, trustworthy people, so people liked to do business with them. Their religious beliefs also led them to live modestly even as they began to prosper. Living below their means, they became quite wealthy.

**“and land, with persecutions” (v. 30).** Jesus interjects a surprising word here—persecutions. Christians can never be completely comfortable in this world, because the gospel that we preach runs counter to the values of this world. Mark’s church experienced persecution, and Christians are still persecuted around the world today. Christians are being martyred daily, sometimes in large numbers. We should not assume that we will be exempt from persecution.

Jesus concludes by reassuring Peter, **“But many who are first will be last; and the last first”**(v. 31). In the kingdom of God, the person who loves God will be first, and the person who loves money will be last. The person who takes care of an ailing neighbor will be first, and the person who takes care of Number One will be last. What we see is not at all what we can expect to get once God’s Great Reversal takes place.



<https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1485>

The story of Jesus and the rich man, presented variously in all three synoptic traditions, is notoriously challenging and has elicited any number of creative approaches to ameliorating what seems to most of us a ridiculously extreme demand.

From concocting a mythic entrance to Jerusalem that required a camel to unburden itself of all it was carrying to reading it as an intentionally impossible demand to drive us to Christ, interpreters over the centuries have been tempted to tone down this passage.

Which means we should read with care. Toward this end, I'd suggest attending to two elements of the text that will help us read and preach it with equal measures of integrity and creativity. The first is details. An author cannot tell us everything and the choices he or she therefore necessarily makes are clues to the narrative intention of a particular passage. While there are many revealing details in this passage, I will focus briefly on five.

Jesus is again "on the way" (verse 17). In Mark, this is not merely "a journey" in general (per the NRSV), but rather represents the road to Jerusalem and the cross. So while Jesus' demand of the man may seem extreme to us, it is certainly no less than the demand he places on himself, giving not just his wealth but his very life for the world, including this rich man.

Everywhere else in Mark when a person kneels down to beseech Jesus (verse 17), it is in regard to a request for healing, for him or herself or for someone else. Might Mark therefore view this scene as a healing and invite us to do the same? Looked at this way, Jesus words are not an impossible demand or Herculean test of faith or extreme requirement. Rather, they are a radical prescription to a deep-seated illness and need.

Jesus looks at him with love (verse 21). He does not treat him as insincere or mock him as self-righteous, but rather loves him. Every interpretation we may offer must therefore take seriously Jesus' absolute regard and unconditional love for this man.

He is not asked simply to give away his wealth, but to give it to the poor (not the church either, mind you, but the poor) (verse 21). Implied is the importance of sharing in the hardships and need of one's fellow human beings that is a requirement of life in the kingdom.

The rich man is not the only one who is shocked by Jesus' pronouncement (verses 22, 26). So also are all those within earshot. Given that wealth was considered a sign of blessing in the first century (as well as, I'd argue, in the twenty-first), Jesus words to this man and his later statement about the difficulty the rich will have in entering the kingdom are alarming.

In addition to paying attention to details, we also gain by exploring the gaps of any passage we are reading. Gaps are the elements of the story not told, the places we are invited to use our imagination and in this way enter into the story, even become invested in it. Gaps, therefore, invite questions that, depending on how we answer them, greatly shape our reading. I'll name what I think are four such gaps, both offering some possibilities for exploring them while leaving them open for you to enter into in relation to your preaching context.

Why does Jesus object to being called "good" (verse 18)? Does Jesus think the man is merely trying to flatter him? Possibly, but I wonder instead if Jesus is suggesting that something is amiss with the question itself. Once you imagine that eternal life is something you inherit or earn by being good, perhaps, you've lost. No one is good -- that is, really and truly good -- apart from God.  Which means both that no one is "good enough" to inherit eternal life and that entering the kingdom is finally not about "being good" in the first place.

Is the man overconfident of his ability to keep the commandments (verse 20)? Is he, that is, smug, self-satisfied, or self-righteous? Perhaps, but I don't think so. Not only are the commandments considered in Judaism absolutely "do-able," but Jesus also seems to accept his statement at face value. This does not devalue the commandments -- Jesus starts by naming them as important elements of life with God. Apparently, however, they are not sufficient to constitute that relationship.

Why, precisely, is it difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom (verse 24-25)? Is it the temptation to believe that one is made self-sufficient by one's wealth with no need for God or others? Is it that one is desensitized to the needs of others by wealth, insulated from the normal needs of those around us? Can it be that wealth in some way distances us from one of the elements of being human itself -- that is, the inescapable dimension of being dependent on others? From the beginning of creation, after all, it is "not good" that we be alone. Might it be that as wealth removes us from the natural dependence and contingency of the human condition we actually lose some of our humanity?

Is Peter boasting with his profession (verse 28)? Again, it may be, but I suspect that he needs additional reassurance. Interestingly, Jesus does not rebuke Peter as if it were a vain boast, but apparently he interrupts him. Peter "began to say," the text reads, implying that Jesus jumps in to make promises to Peter both about the "rewards" all those who follow will receive as well as the "hardships" (persecutions) that the life of discipleship will entail. Is Peter, then, a cautionary tale for us or a model of discipleship?

Any and all of these questions have a variety of possible answers, and how we both address and employ them will be shaped by our sense of the particular situation and needs of our context. One thing seems clear. This passage is about wealth and the challenges it presents and, simultaneously, it is about discipleship, the need to follow Jesus and to be aware and even concerned about those things that would keep us from following Jesus "on the way."