*ENTERING THE KINGDOM . . . OR NOT*

Mark 10:17-30

October 10, 2021

While the Pharisees seek to test Jesus, others seek His expert opinion on the best way to ensure eternal life. A man runs up to him (Matthew has a rich man; Luke makes him a ruler; we don’t know who or what he is from Mark. At least not yet.) We do know that he’s polite. “Good teacher . . . “

“Why do you call me good? No one is good, except God alone.”

This brusque response has always bothered me. Why does Jesus say it like that? Why does He even say it at all? Why is He browbeating one who comes to ask Him a simple, but important question? And He, if anyone, is good, right?

Well, the brusque response gets to the core issue raised by this encounter. It’s not a throwaway. The man’s salutation assumes that one can find goodness in human resources and accomplishments. Probably he identifies himself as ‘good’ as well, and asks his question wanting to know how to ensure that his goodness will pay off in eternal life. He hopes that Jesus can relieve any lingering doubts about his chances and inform him if there is anything in the fine print he needs to worry about.

After turning aside the greeting, Jesus directs the inquirer to the Ten Commandments, which the man already knows. Either the man is disappointed to learn nothing new from Jesus, or pleased that his hunch about his good prospects in the age to come has been confirmed. His response, “Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy,” is then either a defensive reaction or a triumphant exclamation. “All right! Jesus says it’s the Ten Commandments, and I’ve done those. I’m good!”

With an eye for poignant detail, Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the man and loved him. (10:21). Jesus doesn’t sneer at his claims to have obeyed the law. He believes what he says about his obedience, but *because He loves him*, he challenges him directly. Jesus doesn’t try to spare his feelings or avoid offending him, but candidly speaks the truth. The man regards himself as respectably good, but being respectably good is not enough.

He lacks one thing. This statement implies that knowing the commandments and faithfully keeping them do not secure eternal life. Jesus gives him four directives: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor . . . . Then come, follow me.” These commands stress that if one wants eternal life, everything depends on one’s response to Jesus.

The command to sell all sounds out-of-bounds unreasonable to us, but most people in the ancient world would have heard it as a radical but sound advice for those who were seriously devout. The Dead Sea Scrolls required adherents to the sect to contribute their possessions to the common treasury. The book of Acts reports that members of the first Christian community in Jerusalem did the same to assist the needs of their fellow believers (Acts 4:32-37). Even pagans would have understood the importance, in principle of renouncing wealth.

Later Rabbis specifically forbade giving away all of one’s resources. They limited the maximum that one could give away to 20 percent so that one wouldn’t become penniless and a burden to others.

Jesus insists, though, that the wisest investments accrue interest in the treasuries of heaven. Jesus has nothing good to say about money. He regards possessions as an almost insurmountable obstacle that prevent a person from giving themself completely to God. Wealth is not just something neutral, but is toxic to the soul. The best thing to do with money is to invest it in heavenly futures by feeding the destitute.

The disciples’ reaction to Jesus’ bombshell about the rich matches a lot of people’s reactions: shock and consternation. even those who know in their heads that money doesn’t buy happiness or heaven still wish in their hearts that they had more. Consequently, Jesus repeats Himself to drive home the point.

And for the first and only time in the Gospel of Mark, He addresses the disciples as children, as if to remind them that they must become like children if they are going to enter the kingdom of God. (Incidentally, that passage about becoming like children is the very one that leads into ours. It’s at Mark 10:14-16.)

Children have little concept of the value of money. Adults however, do, because they know how hard money is to come by and all the things that it has to be used for. Adults easily fall prey to Mammon and become deceived into thinking that they can find life in wealth and possessions. Many find it hard to give up even a small amount of something so valued, let alone give up all they have, even for the hope of eternal life.

Jesus resorts to colorful hyperbole to reinforce the point that those who are ruled by money cannot be ruled by God. The rich will find entering the kingdom of God (coming under God’s care) more difficult than trying to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle. The opening of a needle is the smallest thing imaginable, and the camel was the largest animal in Palestine. Shocked at the seeming hopelessness of getting to heaven, the disciples ask, “Then who can be saved?”

Various attempts have been made to dodge the bullet the text aims at us, and some have become well known. Some try to soothe consciences by assuming that what Jesus says applies only to those who are rich. (The rich are then assumed to be those who earn more or have more than we have.) You and I always manage to fall below an imaginary “riches danger line,” so that we can comfort ourselves that Jesus intended this lesson for someone else.

Another dodge that’s made is to say, “money isn’t the problem. It’s how we use or invest it, how we steward it for God - things, or not.” This bid to soften Jesus’ demands began quite early, with a textual variant to 10:24 that reads, “How hard it is for those *who trust in riches* to enter the Kingdom of God.”

More dodges: this passage has been subjected to clever exegetical doctoring that attempts either to reduce the size of the camel, or enlarge the needle’s eye. You should always be suspicious of exegesis that softens Jesus’ radical demands. If a person can say after encountering the teachings of Jesus, “all these things I have kept since I was a boy,” it probably means that we have met only a watered down version of it.

As Mark Twin said, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me. It’s the parts that I do understand.” We do better if we confess that we are too weak to follow Jesus on His terms than if we try to find loopholes that allow us to continue in our complacency.

One of those complacent notions was the equating wealth and possessions as a sign of a good life. Material prosperity was widely seen as a reward or byproduct of spiritual virtue. Things go well for the good, for men and women of good character, and poorly for the bad, for those who lack good character and self-discipline.

Remember my saying that Jesus’ brusqueness about ‘why do you call me good? No one is good but God but God alone’ was just the point of this passage? Here’s a man who has been led to believe all his life that his wealth was a sign of his goodness. But this man’s wealth has nothing to do with his salvation, his inheriting eternal life, as Mark puts it.

What then are the relationships between faith and reward, or virtue and wealth? Why must this man give up his riches in order to follow Jesus? What will he get in return?

A standard answer is that there is nothing wrong with wealth itself. The problem is not wealth per se, but one’s attitude toward it. As we accumulate riches, we are tempted to trust in our possessions and our powers of acquiring them, rather than in God. We are more apt to trust in our own virtue, right? than in God. Even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth can lead to pride. That’s why it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It’s hard to let go of our comfort and security in this life—and the more we have, the harder it gets.

Jesus’ promise to the disciples is thus perplexing. He promises that everyone who has sacrificed for his sake will receive, now, in this age, a hundred times more than he or she has given up, and will inherit eternal life in the age to come.

Looky here. If the reason for discipleship is the promise of its reward, then discipleship seems to be no more virtuous than the naked pursuit of material gain. But to take Jesus’ promise literally seems to push the notion of the reward for faith beyond His real intent. Faith is not simply an expedient route to friends and fortune and stuff.

On the contrary, the reward for faith is of a different and higher order than what we sacrifice for it. He’s speaking in a metaphorical sense about our receiving a hundred times more than we have given up. It is not simply more of the same, a hundred fields and houses rather than one. It is eternal salvation.

And more paradoxically than that, we cannot attain even this higher reward—eternal life—by striving for it. If our primary concern is our own salvation, through faith or works, then we have missed the point of both faith and works.

So Jesus’ answer to the rich man is doubly shocking: First, He questions not merely greed, but also wealth itself and the virtues that help us acquire it. Remember, even honestly acquired and generously shared wealth is dangerous to our salvation, because it prompts us to rely on ourselves rather than God.

Second, and even more shocking, Jesus questions those who pride themselves on their virtue and faith “No one is good but God Himself.” Even honestly sought virtue and faith are dangerous, because they also prompt us to rely on ourselves rather than God. We are saved only when we stop worrying about our salvation and turn attention to God and neighbor.

Amen.