

## **Challenged to our roots**

Menno Mennonite Church

October 13, 2024

**Purpose:** To engage the hard saying of Jesus to the rich young ruler at its foundational assumption about what blessing look like.

**Message:** The work of discipleship is not keyed to our ability to afford to do so, but is a function of God's grace.

**Scripture:** Mark 10: 17-31 (I will read); Psalm 90:12-17 (please read)

**Synopsis:** We rightly classify the conversation with the rich young ruler and Jesus as one of the hard sayings that we are left wanting to know what to do with. Declaring a correlation between wealth and spiritual health is touchy ground to say nothing of rude. Even more so it also addresses a number of our fundamental assumptions around what it looks like to receive God's favor. Spoken or not, we like the disciples look at the outward signs of a person's life for symbols of success, sometimes grasping on to these ideas well beyond the bigger notions of grace and charity. Jesus pokes at that, reminding us that unless we leave everything behind, even our comfortable assumptions, we are still in want of the kingdom.

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus 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?”

<sup>18</sup> Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good?  
No one is good but God alone.

<sup>19</sup> You 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.’ ”

<sup>20</sup> He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus, 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.”

<sup>22</sup> When he heard this,  
he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup> 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!”

<sup>24</sup> And the disciples were perplexed at these words.

But Jesus said to them again,  
“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!

<sup>25</sup> It 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.”

<sup>26</sup> They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?”

<sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said,  
“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God;  
for God all things are possible.”

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

<sup>29</sup> Jesus 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,

<sup>30</sup> who 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.

<sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

There are times when we wish the Jesus would not have said what he said. I am guessing this might number among them. There are times where I sit down with a cup of coffee on Monday morning, begin to consider the lectionary for a given week and find myself muttering “you can’t be serious.” That was this week. But that is also a good sign, I have also found that there might be something to work on here and something to work on. Sometimes it is precisely our discomforts, the places in our spiritual selves that we don’t want to go that we need to pay best attention to. There is something that I like to call a “Holy discomfort” that can arise when things tend to bubble up and poke us here and there that can awaken us to something that we need to do and pay attention to. It is the stuff that pushes us and doesn’t quite ever leaves us alone. I can’t say whether this discomfort may or may not necessarily be all that holy in this particular case, but all the same: here we are and here is Jesus, and what are we to do with it.

Mark of all the gospel writers goes about the story at such a breathless and demanding pace it can be hard to keep up. It is here that we keep encountering “and immediately” as one scene blends to the next and one hard situation keeps coming. The pattern almost seems designed not so much to encourage faith but to display how complicated and demanding it can be. Time and again people and situations come before Jesus and Jesus confirms their faith while also displaying no easy or welcome answers. That is certainly the case here and it needs to be said: among the only thing that we can do with it is manage it—find a way to work with the edges sufficiently as to not get splinters. We come up with ways of working with the text and finding our ways around it. Maybe this is a passage that has to be means-tested. There is a threshold above us where rich starts and we are somehow exempt. But that doesn’t wash. The trouble is if we are to speak with any sort of seriousness, North American middle class existence can not be understood as anything but rich. I think he is speaking to us not because we are rich, but because we are human and as such are given to relying on our stuff first and foremost. We might think that Jesus wasn’t serious. I don’t think that holds to the Jesus we have in Mark very well or the overall conversation that we have in the passage. Alternatively we could focus on the later end of the verse where we start receiving what could sound like investment advice and a return on the investment made, turning Jesus into a prosperity preacher. Again I think this not only falls short of the mark, but does a great disservice to the nature and the meaning of the Gospel. We could go on with our various dodges here—not least being “let’s just not talk about it”. I don’t

mind sharing that I didn't find a previous sermon on Mark 10 that I could use for reference—one more reason to write one now.

What I am going to propose here is that we engage the text for what it is: a description of the difficult way of the kingdom that is being set before each and every one of us as we are invited time and again to come and follow along the Jesus way. Jesus is reminding us that the way of the kingdom is not the way that we are used to seeing or understanding the world. The way of the kingdom is something that we are invited to bring our whole selves to knowing that it will demand much of us to be changed and to follow.

First things first to make absolutely clear here: the rich young man here is no bad guy. I don't think it's a stretch to describe the rich man as searching. Having kept God's law, he seems to have an inkling that there's more to the spiritual life. Presumably, he's sought the wisdom of other rabbis; and presumably, they've probably pointed him to what he's been doing: keeping the commandments. And yet, the feeling that there's something more cannot be shaken. He comes honestly seeking that which he desires most—to a peace with and in God that will bring goodness into his life. He is beloved of Christ. Notice that: in verse 21 Jesus looks at him and loves him, but challenges him all the same. This is a person actively seeking God's heart and he is beloved for it.

There are times and places where world views come into contact and contrast. Those are always fruitful times. Most of the time that comes into play when our assumptions of how the world works fall apart. I will always remember one occasion while part of Study Service term in China where we were allowed to go as small groups to the nearby homes of those who Chinese students who we were tutoring in English. Being the honored guests, we had to see and experience everything (to say nothing of the novelty of bringing home a couple of westerners). Among the places we were taken was one of the Taoist temples with which the family was connected. Asked if I was hungry while admiring the beauty all around, I told my host "sure, I could go for something" only to have my hosts turn around and respectfully ask the guard for the best of what has been offered on the alter to give to me. After some not insignificant shock and a brief cross cultural application of theology, I gratefully accepted the oranges offered me out of the best of what they had. There was no refusing this—we were guests and they wanted to be sure that we were looked after. I assumed that once something was offered it is bad form to take it away from the gods. But it was the last thing that I was expecting.

I think we have a similar mismatch in assumptions at work when we are talking about our world and the ways of it and the ways of the kingdom and that it is this incompatibility that we are trying to contend with in this passage. It is one that I think is alive and well today: when we operate in the world of economics, especially when we come to it from a place where we have at least some power, we are given to thinking to the world in transactional terms. Moreover, we subtly and not assume that if you have money, if you have power, if you have success, you also possess a certain level of goodness to go with it. Instead of going away with joy in his heart because he had found the fullness that he had been looking for, the rich young man is perplexed by the impossibility of it all.

The language here is telling from the Greek on up. The young man comes looking for a way to inherit (in the Greek κληρονομέω—a word that is tied to receiving an inheritance, or in other words, acquiring an asset. Jesus' response after the conversations speaks of the difficulty of people entering into the kingdom (εἰσερχομαι (*eiserchomai*)) a word that has far more to do with the joining into something or physically aligning yourself with something than anything else. The man was looking for a transaction—another law to follow, another task to complete in order to achieve and what he gets in return is a change in assumption entirely.

Coming to Jesus within our assumption of riches requires a perspective change, particularly of what eternal life means in the here-and-now. And before we get too ahead of ourselves, every character in this passage, except Jesus, is in need of a new way of understanding life in the Kingdom. Viewing wealth as a sign of blessing from God is one thing, but then always categorizing it as a sign of righteousness is another. We commonly mistake grace for reward—not to mention commonly misunderstanding what Jesus's reward actually is—it is the consequential invitation to come and follow.

We are given to making salvation operate on the terms that we understand. We achieve grace by our own initiatives, good behavior and general outlook. We appreciate the good character reference we receive for doing the stuff that we ought. We, like the disciples with Jesus are given to seeing the world with wealth-tinted glasses that can convince us that the way the universe works is the way that we are accustomed to it working: those on the top are there for a reason, and that we singularly earn what we receive.

But Jesus would puncture that view then and now. Salvation is that which God does to put us and God on the right relationship that was intended all along. We do not earn this. We do

not procure this. We accept it. We receive it. But we do so in order that we can then live and breath in the new kingdom that we are invited into all the time. Knowing grace, we are invited to come and be part of the kingdom, to follow the new way through the portal of grace into a different world. It is a world that invites us to offer all that we have to the one in whose wake we are following. It involves coming into a way of being that holds all things as possible and good, even that which we might be called to lay down for the sake of following. For in that other side, there is not only a new heaven and a new earth but also a new economics where we are given all that we need, and even more than what we can bear to expect as we follow closely the living God. It is also worth saying: Jesus gives the man a difficult task and one that causes him grief. We know he went away grieved. We don't know what he ultimately did with it. Perhaps he did find his way to still say yes, to come, and to see with new eyes.

Jesus points us all the time to the ultimacy of the kingdom of God, a kingdom whose treasure may not look like what we have here, and involves reward and reality that can far outstrip our imagination. We are invited to lay down the primacy of that which we can buy for the priority of that which we can share: not out of guilt; not out of demand; not out of law, but only out of grace—a grace that changes us from what we know to where are promised to be. That is the work of following. That is the work of the kingdom. That is the response of grace to which we are each invited.

May we all know that God bids us to come, be saved, and in the saving be changed to the point where even our stuff cannot hold us back from the promise of the kingdom. Amen.