

Today is Stewardship Sunday and so it is fitting that we are given a gospel reading that speaks about wealth, money and all the “stuff” we think we must possess. Now, I realize money isn’t going away anytime soon. However, Jesus offers us the possibility to see past it, especially when it comes to the things that matter most in life. As we meet up with Jesus today, we find him telling a young land owner there is freedom in leaving possessions and “stuff” behind.

Today, a rich young man kneels before Jesus and asks, “What must I **do** to **inherit** eternal life?” This man’s mindset is totally in contradiction to Jesus’ teaching. He is a man of privilege and his mindset is one of **entitlement**. Rather than receiving the kingdom in complete dependence as a little child, something Jesus just shared with us last week, this rich man wants to know what he can **do** to **inherit** eternal life. The words “do” and “inherit” are of prime importance in this reading. Just think about it – one can rarely *do* anything to receive an *inheritance* because, by definition, an inheritance is something a person can only be **given**. Anyway, a certain tension starts to arise in this conversation.

That tension rises higher as the man asserts he has done as scripture commands and has kept all of the commandments since his

youth. When he says this, it is interesting that Jesus actually gives him more to **do**. We are told Jesus loves this rich man, and he does not view the man as intentionally evil. Rather than condemning the “sin” of the rich man, Jesus confronts the man with his *weakness*, his captivity to possessions that prevents him from living into the full life of the kingdom of God. Jesus says to him, “Sell what you own, and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” As Jesus says this, he names the “power” that holds the man captive and invites the man to step into freedom. Well, the man is shocked and goes away grieving.

It is interesting that, in Mark’s gospel, we are never really told definitively what the kingdom of God *is*. But, at this point, Mark does make clear to us what the kingdom of God is *not* as Jesus offers a lyrical but terrifying triplet of wisdom. And, his point is sharpened by the razor’s edge of absurdist humor. Jesus says to his disciples:

***How difficult it will be for those with riches to enter the kingdom of God!***

***...Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God!***

***It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God! (10:23-25)***

Well, from this we can gather that whatever else the kingdom of God may be, it is plainly where the rich are *not*. And, yes, Jesus' words are harsh as a razor's edge for **us**. Today we North American Christians, who can only be defined as rich, relative to the global distribution of wealth and power, would do well to reflect at length on this terrifying triplet. For it remains as dissonant to our ears today as it was to the disciples in the story, and it provokes the same kind of astonishment. In fact, throughout the ages, the church has tried to explain away what Jesus is talking about. And, Christians have been so anxious that Jesus might be leveling a critique of the rich here that we have missed the fact that this triplet is not in fact a statement about *the rich*, but about the nature of the *Kingdom*. These reiterations – all in the indicative mood – insist that the kingdom of God is simply that time and place *in which there are no rich and poor*. By definition, then, the rich cannot enter – not, that is, with their affluenza intact.

To understand this story better, let's dive more deeply into this whole episode. The rich man asks about *inheriting* eternal life. When he says this, he is referencing the fact that landowners often became wealthy by exploiting the nearby poor landowners. When the poor couldn't pay back loans to the wealthy, the rich could take the poor person's property. It was

a way to “inherit” without being a next of kin. This process was the reason for the vast socio-economic inequality that characterized the time of Jesus. It is almost certainly the way this man ended up with “many properties.” Mark has given us a succinct portrait of the ideology of *entitlement*. So, as this rich man comes to Jesus he comes from this entitlement perspective and, he doesn’t just want to earn his way into eternal life, he wants to buy his way in. How is Jesus supposed to respond to a question that is so off key?

Knowing this man isn’t ready to hear the truth right away, Jesus eases him in by talking through the commandments. Notice, Jesus never directly states that following the commandments is a prerequisite into eternal life. But the commandments are a way to get closer to God. By following God’s law, this rich man is closer to accepting the good news Jesus has to give. Yet, there is one more step! Clearly, this rich man is **relying** on his wealth and the power that wealth has given him instead of relying on God to get him through life. So, Jesus tells him to sell his possessions and give the money to those in need. That would enable this man to take his focus off himself and put it on another. This is **not** good news for the rich man, so he goes away grieving.

The reality is that, for this man, a power greater than himself holds him captive – the *law of money*. Likewise, we are held captive to our wealth and the *law of money*. Jacques Ellul, in his book *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, has noted that the only way to live free from money is to give it away. He writes:

How do we overcome the spiritual “power” of money? Not by accumulating more money, not by using money for good purposes, not by being just and fair in our dealings. The *law of money* is the law of accumulation, of buying and selling. That is why the only way to overcome the spiritual “power” of money is to give our money away, thus desacralizing it and freeing ourselves from its control....To give away money is to win a victory over the spiritual power that oppresses us. (p. 166)

Out of love, Jesus speaks harsh words to the rich man and, out of love, he speaks harsh words to us because he wants us to be free. Yet, the depth of our captivity makes freedom difficult, if not impossible. So where is the good news?

Jesus says, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”(v. 27) There is **nothing** that we can do to **earn** our way into heaven. Absolutely nothing. Eternal life is beyond our reach on our own. The good news is that God **gifts** us with eternal life. God, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, brings us into eternal life. No amount of money, brownie points, or prerequisites can get us there. Only God can get us there and it is something we have already been given.

There is nothing we can do to earn it. **It is all gift!** So, what shall we do?  
We simply receive it, live into it, and cheerfully give thanks and give back  
for this amazing gift.