

As Rich just reminded us this morning, we have come to that time of year when we intentionally place a focus on Stewardship. 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. I realize money, and the multiple issues, challenges, and questions concerning money, are not going away anytime soon. And, many of these issues center around what we **do**, and what we need **to do**, to access our money and our privilege. Many of these issues center around our captivity to our possessions, and the good life most of us enjoy. However, Jesus offers us the possibility to see past some these issues and challenges, 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 landowner 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?” The focus of this man’s mindset significantly **contradicts** Jesus’ teaching. This rich young man is a person of privilege, his mindset is one of **entitlement**, and his question is quite insightful as it tells us a great deal about him. 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 must **do** to **inherit** eternal life. The words “do” and “inherit” are of prime importance in this reading. Just think about it – as we think about inheritance, 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 states he has **done** as scripture commands and has kept all the commandments since he was a youth. When he says this, it is interesting to look at what **Jesus** does. To get his point across, Jesus gives this man **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 rather frightening triplet of wisdom. And, his point is sharpened by the razor's edge of ridiculous, 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 each one of **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 Jesus' rather frightening triplet. For it remains as dissonant to our ears today as it was to his 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 God's 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 no poor.* So, by definition, 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 simply take the poor person's property. It was **the** 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. This 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 become closer to God. By following God's law, this rich man is closer to accepting the good news

Jesus proclaims. 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. Well, 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) One of the deepest truths that we find so difficult to understand is that there is **nothing** that we can do to **earn** our way into the kingdom of God, or inherit eternal life. **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 life, 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, cheerfully give thanks, and with gratitude for all God has given us, give back for this amazing gift.