

“Give to the Poor”

As he 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?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

(Mark 10: 17-22)

Few stories in scripture are more arresting than this one. A man comes to Jesus and asks a critical and personal theological question. He appears to be an upstanding member of the community, apparently of good character and extensive means--exactly the kind of person we might want to recruit for one of our own congregations. Had this person asked of us the question he asked of Jesus, we would have wasted no time mapping the road to eternity and assuring him that he was a perfect fit for our congregation. We can only imagine how eagerly the disciples anticipated Jesus’ winning invitation to this wealthy landowner to join their fledgling band of followers.

Methodically, Jesus dismantles all such imaginings. Not only does he fail to win the rich man for the Kingdom of God, Jesus almost seems intent on driving him away. Rather than focusing on all the things which might *qualify* this man for membership in the Kingdom, Jesus probes for the one thing which *disqualifies* him.

The details of Mark’s narrative do not soften the blow of Jesus’ reply to the rich man’s question. The man went away “shocked” and “grieving.” The disciples were stunned. Jesus only intensifies their angst with his commentary on the rich man’s departure: “*How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!*” At this remark the disciples are “perplexed,” but Jesus pushes still harder: “*Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God. 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.*” Unable to reply directly, the disciples are “astounded” and say to one another, “*Then who can be saved?*” The story concludes:

Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” (cf. Mark 10:23-27)

At several levels, we find ourselves in this story. Like the man who came to Jesus, we too have many possessions. In a world where nearly half of humanity exists on less than two dollars a day, most of us are blessed by relative degrees of wealth. While we can always find people who have more, we can find many more people who have much less.

Like the disciples, we are misled by the association of wealth and righteousness. Conventional wisdom connected material prosperity and God’s blessing, and this convention fueled the disciples’ dismay over the rich man’s abrupt departure. They reasoned, “If this upstanding, prosperous brother doesn’t qualify for the Kingdom of God, *who does?*”

A challenge to conventional wisdom lurks in Jesus' citation of the commandments, for one of them is not part of the Decalogue: "*You shall not defraud.*" Jesus seems to know that other teachings of the Law are relevant in this case and that this man's *wealth* is not necessarily the product of his *righteousness*. While the disciples seemed ready to take the rich man's profession of obedience to the commandments at face value, Jesus puts him to the test. The story challenges easy associations between wealth and righteousness and conversely, easy associations between poverty and unrighteousness.

We are left with the raw emotions which plague both the rich man and the disciples; they are shocked, grieved, and astounded. What do we do with our wealth? Does our wealth inevitably drive a wedge between us and the Kingdom of God? Whether the rich man defrauded others to acquire his wealth or not, these questions still haunt us. We worry that Jesus demands more than we can deliver, that any one of us thrust into the rich man's predicament would also feel compelled to walk away.

Like the disciples, we hang onto the story's closing line: "*for God all things are possible.*" For *God alone* is able to deliver us from being possessed by our possessions. *God alone* is able to disabuse us of the illusions that we actually own our possessions and that we deserve to have them. *God alone* is able to convince us to live more simply so that others may simply live and to share freely the bounty which has been entrusted to us. *God alone* is able to direct our stewardship of wealth to its rightful end: the service of justice and mercy.

In the end the story drives us back to the life-saving commandments which Jesus commended to the rich man:

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, . . . Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish. (Deut. 8:11-14, 17-19)

God grant us the freedom, grace, and power to release what we do not own and to share what is God's alone with God's children who are in need. Then we can stop walking away from Jesus and embrace his blessing:

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:34-36, 40)