

What Must I Do?

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Text: Mark 10:17-31

I am a child of depression-era parents. Those of you who share that background will know the symptoms. My parents saved every penny they could, and they always sought the safest place to put those savings in anticipation of the next depression. We're not talking about large sums here—my mother was a bank teller, and my father a school teacher. Even though my mother worked in a bank, she had experienced the bank failures of the 1930's, and so she considered even a low-interest savings account to be a somewhat risky proposition. During the 1980's and 90's, when almost everyone else was investing in a burgeoning stock market, my parents invested their savings in savings bonds. The stock market was, as far as they were concerned, not even worthy of consideration. "Legalized gambling," my mother called it. (They also never owned a credit card.) My parents never accumulated much money—they didn't choose the right professions to do that—but a lot of our family discussions had to do with money and the need to have a reliable income.

Today's text from the Gospel of Mark has to do with the relationship between a man and his money. It's a difficult topic for church people. But despite our squeamishness about it, our relationship with money is a recurrent theme in both the Old and the New Testaments. "But that's personal!" is a frequent response when the subject is brought up in church. But it's no more personal than the topic of sexuality, which has been a major

issue in so many churches. And the Bible talks a lot more about money than it does about sex. So yes, many of us have trouble talking about money.

If it's at all reassuring, so did people in Jesus' time. In today's passage from Mark we read of a man who approached Jesus with a simple question, to which Jesus gave a most startling answer. The question was, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied with a listing of some of the Ten Commandments, and asked, "Have you followed these commandments?" "Yes," the man answered hopefully, "since my youth." Jesus looked at him and, according to Mark, loved him. But then he delivered the zinger, "One thing you lack. Go, sell all that you own, and give the proceeds to the poor." He would have his reward in heaven, Jesus told him, and unencumbered here on earth, he could then follow Jesus. The man went away shocked and grieving, Mark tells us, because he had many possessions.

Jesus loved him, Mark says. Though this episode also appears in Matthew and Luke, it is only Mark who injects this statement, "Jesus loved him." And it's important. It's Mark's reminder that even when we fall short of what Jesus expects from us, he continues to love us. Our sin can never separate us from the love of God. And perhaps Jesus' laying down of what seem to us to be an almost impossible condition is also Mark's way of reminding us of one of the central tenets of the gospel: we can't *earn* God's love and we can't *achieve* God's salvation. God loves us despite what we do, not because of what we do. God's love doesn't seek out the value of what we do; it confers value on who we are. The rich young man was asking the wrong question from the very outset: "What can I *do* to inherit eternal life?"

And then there follows in Mark what must seem like a counterproductive quotation for a preacher to use during a stewardship campaign: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God." And when the disciples were perplexed by this, he added, "How hard it is—no further qualification—for a mortal to enter the Kingdom of

God.” In other words how hard it is for *anyone* to enter the Kingdom of God. But to further emphasize the point about wealth, Jesus goes on to say the much quoted, often explained away, but still very cutting words, “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 heaven.”

What are we to make of these statements? Again, we’re not alone in finding them difficult and troubling. According to Mark, the disciples were astounded. “Well then, who *can* be saved?” they asked Jesus. And we ourselves might ask the same question, because what Jesus said about rich people applies to all, or almost all, of us. If we consider ourselves to be a part of the world community and therefore part of God’s family, then merely by virtue of the fact that we live in this country, we are among the richest people in the world. Three billion of the world’s population live on \$2 a day or less. So, if you’re feeling smug about Jesus’ statements about rich people, don’t. On a global scale, Jesus is talking about virtually all of us.

Our natural tendency in reading this passage is to focus on Jesus’ colorful imagery about the plight of the rich, whether we consider ourselves to be among them or not, and to pass lightly over Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ question, the question about who *can* be saved. But that answer is the most important part of the passage; it’s what the passage is really all about. According to Mark, Jesus looked at the disciples and said, “For mortals [rich *or* poor], entering the kingdom of heaven through their own powers is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.” With God, all things are possible. Again, it’s not what we do that saves us; it’s who God is that saves us. That’s the real message.

It isn’t that God’s gracious love gives us a free pass from responsibility toward our neighbors and toward God, though. In his discussion of rich people, camels and needles, Jesus used figurative language about how we regard and how we use our money. He uses such language to talk about the more fundamental issue of the sin of worshiping idols,

those things that are less than God. The point that Jesus is making is that we have to relinquish what is dear to us if it gets in the way of our devotion to God--if what we hold dear is what we worship, replacing God as the object of our worship. And we know that wealth can do that to us, that the pursuit of that extra profit, that leg up on others, the attainment of the status that wealth confers—the whole enterprise of the accumulation of wealth—can become an all-consuming passion. We also know that the single-minded pursuit of wealth can ruin family life and destroy human relationships, that it can reduce us to loveless competitors, fixated on and hemmed in by our own greed.

But wealth in and of itself isn't the problem. Remember that Paul said that it's the *love* of money that is the root of evil. It's when we love money and what it signifies to the extent that it takes the place of God that we're in trouble. For someone who has replaced the love of God with the love of money, the way toward salvation, toward wholeness of life can seem as narrow as that opening in the eye of a needle.

What does all of this have to do, then, with stewardship, which our church council wanted me to talk about, and which is a spiritual issue I want to talk about? Stewardship is kind of a fusty word, with some unfortunate associations, about how we deal with our money. For many of us, the mere mention of stewardship can evoke unpleasant feelings: an uncomfortable mix of pleading, guilt and the unsettling prospect of public shaming. Some cynical pastors even refer to the stewardship sermon that I am preaching this morning as the “sermon on the amount.”

Perhaps we're so uncomfortable with the idea of stewardship because we somehow associate stewardship with pinched self-denial, with giving up something so that we can give to the church. This isn't the attitude that we find in the gospels. Remember how a woman interrupted a meal that Jesus was having with his friends to bathe his feet in expensive oil? Remember how the disciples grumbled that this was a waste of money, that the money would be better spent on the poor? And remember how Jesus rebuked his

disciples, essentially saying that extravagance toward God is not something to be ashamed of, but rather is a response to God's extravagance toward us? Good stewards don't salt away the gifts that they have received from God; good stewards can't wait to share them.

After our national disaster on September 11, 2001, our church's national offices in Cleveland received messages of sympathy and concern from partner churches from all over the world. Because I was then the Executive Minister of Wider Church Ministries, many of those messages came as emails to my computer. One was from the Evangelical Church of Lesotho, a church in southern Africa that is poor materially and rich spiritually. It is a church that has received both our missionaries and our church's financial assistance over the years. Along with their expression of sorrow and solidarity, they sent word that this desperately poor church had sent us \$500 for assistance to the victims of 9/11. My first impulse was to send it back. I reasoned that they needed the money a lot more than we did. But then I realized that this church had needed to send this gift to us, and that we needed to receive it graciously and gratefully. This church saw it as a spiritual need that they be generous, extravagant even, with their meager resources. They had to do it. This poor church hadn't just sent us a monetary gift; it had shown us something of what the Kingdom of God is like. They had exhibited a holy extravagance much like the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and with precious ointment.

The rich young man couldn't understand what Jesus meant when he suggested that he relinquish his ties to his money, and fix his devotion on God. He was hemmed in by his possessions. He was actually possessed by his possessions. And he was still fixated on what he had to do rather than what God had already done for him and for us in giving us Jesus. He saw giving generously as a zero-sum game--either I have my wealth or I don't--while Jesus sees our giving and sharing as a blessing, as an imitation of the very nature of God. Giving is not self-denial; it's self-expression. It's not a duty to be done in a reluctant or mean-spirited way; it's a privilege, something that should bring us joy.

So, over the next weeks when you think about your own giving to God's mission through the church, through the giving of your time and talents and the giving of your financial resources, I hope that you won't give until it hurts. I hope that you'll give until it feels good. No, we can't earn our salvation, nor can we buy our way into heaven, but we can, in imitation of Christ, and in faithfulness to Christ, joyfully seek to celebrate God's own extravagance toward us. At the conclusion of our passage from Mark, Jesus tells us that when we get things straight in our lives, when we leave behind what we need to leave behind in order to embrace Christ's kingdom among us, our family will be expanded a hundredfold and our blessings will be multiplied beyond imagination. With God, after all, everything is possible.

Amen.