



This Guy Thinks It's All About Him

TEXT
Mark 10:17-27

March 12, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

If I had known this rich man, I think like Jesus, I would have loved him too. This unnamed man asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said, “Sell all that you have and give it to the poor.”

Do you think that’s true? Do you think if we sell everything we will have eternal life? I don’t. I don’t think it has anything to do with eternal life. Nevertheless, this is a text that I need to study every year. I’m not sure I do. But it is a text I need to study every year because I am so much like this man. I think you are too.

I say that because, like this unnamed rich man, I too strive to follow the commandments.

Like this man, I too look to the life of Jesus to speak to the most important questions in my life. And like this man, I am rich. Oh, I don’t think of myself that way. But if I look at people in the world, my present is more comfortable and my future is more secure than most. That’s why I need this text.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks.

He asks a rich man’s question.¹ Others asked Jesus to heal them ... or to heal those they love. Some asked Jesus to forgive them or to make room

for them in society. Some asked Jesus to feed them, 5,000 at a time; or in one case, just let her daughter have the scraps that fall from the rich man’s table.

But not this man. He asks about eternal life. He can think about life eternal because he’s not worried about lesser questions — like how to feed his kids or how to find a job or how to get to the doctor. He can manage those things. He has those things under control. He can think about life beyond because he has mastered life in this world.

Jesus said, “Sell all you have, give it to the poor and follow me.”

Do you think that is true? I don’t. I don’t think selling what we have has anything to do with eternal life. While this is the first person Jesus calls to sell all, he has called many to follow.

Jesus called Peter and Andrew. They followed. Jesus called James and John. We remembered that last Sunday. James and John didn’t get Jesus, but at least they followed him. This is the first person Jesus calls to follow who turns away. Unlike James and John, this man got Jesus, and he realized that following Jesus comes with a cost. He wasn’t sure he could do it.

That worries me because so much of my own faith journey is one that is more comfortable than costly. I sometimes think that is the purpose: that we enter relationship with God and God’s way because it makes us feel better or more alive or more fulfilled. And that’s true. But it’s obviously not the whole truth — because Jesus doesn’t hesitate to call us to do costly things: Forgive 70 times 7; live with a humility that sees the value in others; turn the other cheek; don’t let the injury someone else causes be the most important thing.

He is good at calling us to sacrifice for something bigger: Sell what you have; there are too many poor people.

This man walks away. It’s a hard text. There is a long history of trying to get around this text. Preachers have said, when Jesus said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom, Jesus didn’t mean a real needle. No, no, no, Jesus was referring to a narrow gate in the city wall of Jerusalem — a smaller than normal gate, where a camel would have to remove all baggage to get through. Some say the camel would have to kneel to get through. That makes it easier. The truly faithful rich

can enter the kingdom. The problem with that explanation, as New Testament Scholar Eugene Boring points out, there was no such gate.²

And here's one: Remember that in the early church, there were no copy machines. So to get a copy of the Gospel required copying by hand, word for word. The copies that we have don't all agree because, as you can imagine, sometimes mistakes were made ... sometimes.

And sometimes changes were made intentionally. It happened here. Some scribes changed a word in this text. The Greek word for camel is *kamnlon*. But some changed *kamnlon* to *kamilon* — just a one-letter change. That one letter changed the meaning from “camel” to “rope.” It is harder for a rope to go through the eye of a needle. Well, our friends in Mission Sewing will tell you that getting a rope through the eye of a needle is impossible, but it's not as hard as a camel.

C.S. Lewis once said, “With God, even a camel can pass through the eye of a needle, but it will be very hard on the camel.”

It's clear that with Jesus, wealth is a spiritual reality — not just an economic reality, but a spiritual reality, because wealth influences how we see the world.

That's the point. This is not a text that says wealth is bad or evil. No, this is not about guilt. But wealth does influence how we see the world. And it brings greater responsibilities.

You have heard me say before, and I should say this often, that I think Christians are called to be generous. If we are really

seeking to follow Christ, giving money is essential. Generosity is a basic Christian practice.

Carol and I tithe. We give 10 percent of our income away, almost all of that to the church. I recommend it — not for the church, but for you. Tithing has limited other choices for our family; but tithing is a long way from selling all we have.

Early in my ministry, I met with a couple for premarital counseling. Among other things, I told them, as I always do, that they should determine how much of their money they were going to give away. Money is sometimes a stress point in marriages, and giving some away is a help. I encouraged them to tithe. The groom didn't go to church, so this was a new word for him. “What's tithe?” I explained that, traditionally, tithe is 10 percent of your income. They decided they would do that.

They turned in a pledge card to the church. They told me, “We have decided to give \$308 a month (10 percent of their \$37,000 annual income).” They were very excited about it. I wasn't surprised. I have never known anyone who tithes to be anything but excited about it. I have known those who give little who are grumpy, but never have I known someone to tithe and feel anything but joy about it. The person who wasn't excited about it was Ralph, the bride's father.

At the wedding rehearsal, Ralph pulled me aside and said, “Preacher, I know what you are saying, and I appreciate it and everything, but now is not the time for these kids to tithe. They are

just getting started. They can't afford it now.”

Well, I couldn't argue with that. Of course, give them a little time, but it will still be hard to tithe because they will need to buy their first house. Those are tight times. And then the children come. And when a child takes that first breath, she sucks in your net worth. And then there's college. I had two in college at one time. I was looking for night work.

Then there are weddings and planning for retirement, and then you retire, and you can't tithe on a fixed income. The truth is, we can't afford it. Ralph is right about that. So that has to be the point.

Jesus is calling us to a generosity that we cannot afford. Our faith is supposed to change how we live. But how long will we live if we sell everything?

This text is about more than giving. It's about how we see the world.

Jesus said, “It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” The key to understanding this text is to recognize that Jesus and the rich man are not having the same conversation. He asks about eternal life, but Jesus didn't talk about eternal life. He spoke of the kingdom of God. I don't think those are the same. Eternal life is about me ... maybe just me. It's about my life going on. The kingdom is about all of life being transformed.

The greatest concern the rich man has is that his life might stop. But that's too small. Because for many — maybe for most in this world — life going

on tomorrow like it is today is not necessarily good news. They don't need life to be eternal; they need it to be transformed. That's the kingdom of God.

When your greatest threat is that life might stop, you are rich. Jesus needs the rich man to change his question, to make it bigger.

Think about this: If, in Jesus' day, you were going to give something to the poor, how would you do it? There's no foundation or check to write. You would have to meet them. To feed the hungry, there's no food pantry; you would have to invite them to dinner. Jesus said, *You need to get to know some poor people. You need to get to know some broken people. You need to know some hungry people. Get to know them, really know them, and maybe you will want more than just another day; maybe you will want a new day.*

I had a sore throat and was in the drugstore looking for throat lozenges. An elderly man was there talking to the pharmacist. I could hear him talking with the pharmacist. "How much would just a week's worth cost? I see. Those are mighty big pills. Could we break the pills in half? Would that still be enough medicine? I see."

"You know, Doc, we are getting a bit forgetful at our age. What happens if I miss a day? Maybe take it every other day?"

I don't know that man, and I don't know what that conversation is like, trying to balance medicine and food. But I know that when I walked in there, the most important thing on my mind

was a sore throat. I walked out with a desire for the kingdom.

Jesus said, *You lack one thing. You need some friends who are poor. You need to get to know some broken people.* It's not that they are more important, or better, or more faithful than the friends you have now. It's just if you learn to love them, you will no longer want life just to continue; you will want it to be transformed.

Poverty is something Jesus talked about all the time, and were he preaching in America today, I imagine he would talk about it even more. I don't know how to fix that, but there is a prior question and that is, "How badly do we actually care to fix it?" It's not likely to happen without sacrifice.

Jesus said, *We need to become friends with some poor people, some broken people, some forgotten people, some imprisoned people. When we do, eternal life will no longer seem like big enough work to be worthy of God. We will want life to be transformed.* This is a passage I need to study every year because I am so much like this man.

¹Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (1993), p. 122

²Eugene Boring, *Mark: New Testament Commentary* (2006), p. 292

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.