



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Eternal Life is Not Bold Enough

SCRIPTURE:  
Mark 10:17-27

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March 20, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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**I**t may sound odd to you but I have been thinking that one of the things that Village Church offers you, at least I hope we do—because we are trying to do so with more intention—is a little joy. We try to be a joyful place. It seems to me that joy is not so easy to come by these days.

Maybe joy never comes easily, but these days we have particular reasons that joy may seem elusive. We are all COVID-scarred. This is a virus more deadly than war, made more complicated by misinformation. Actions that should have been scientifically based have become politically charged and have set neighbor against neighbor. It has left us weary.

And it was just over a year ago that the Capitol was attacked, leaving some shocked that something like this could happen in our land. Others met it with a shrug of the shoulders; one Senator described it more like a “tour.” It leaves us scratching our heads how we can see things so differently.

And then there is Putin’s war. There are children who will never get the chance to grow up because bombs are dropping from the sky. In this world, there are always Herods—people of power who choose to ignore morality’s constraints. Morality is always something the powerful will need to choose and too many choose to ignore it.

In these days, I often want to turn away from it all. Just ignore it. I need more joy in my life. Do you know what I’m talking about?

And then you come today and I read to you, “Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” I’ve known a lot of people who give up something for Lent, but I’ve never known anyone who gave up everything. So much for joy!

I talked with a young friend of mine. I asked her,

“How is Daniel?” That’s her first child, a little one. She said, “I think I’m in trouble with this kid.” “Oh, why?” “He spoke his first full sentence last week.” “Wonderful,” I said. “What was his first sentence? Did he say, ‘I love you, Mom?’” “No. He said, ‘I’m not doing that.’”

Well, there are probably more than a few passages in the Bible that trigger an interior voice that says: “Yeah, I’m not doing that... I don’t care if it is Jesus who said it; I’m not doing that.” Forgive 70 times seven? We think, if they don’t straighten up after a few chances, well, they may just be on thin ice. Or love your enemies? We might tolerate them but who really loves their enemies?

But no passage strikes us as so completely unrealistic as the conversation that Jesus has with the rich man. Go sell all you have and give it to the poor? Yeah, I’m not doing that.

We are not alone in that reaction. Not only is this the reaction of the rich man, it was also the reaction of Jesus’ disciples. And through the ages, different scholars, theologians and ordinary pew sitters have interpreted this passage in a variety of ways to avoid the possibility that Jesus meant what he said. Some have said that this instruction was meant not for all Christians, but just for this man. Scholars such as Augustine and Luther and more recently, Kenneth Bailey, have said this man had a particular spiritual deficit such as insincerity or he’s a flatterer, calling Jesus “good teacher,” or he’s just inordinately attached to his money. This is just for him. We are off the hook.

Of course, Jesus says it is harder, not for this guy, but for any rich person, to enter the kingdom than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Back on the hook—or back in the needle’s eye.

Some scholars have pointed out that there is a

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gate in the Jerusalem wall called the Needle's Eye. It's a small, low gate. People could walk through it, but a camel had to work really hard to get through. Gotta grease up that camel to push him through. It's a great explanation, but sadly there is no such gate.

Some have noticed an obvious typo here. The Greek word for camel is *kamelon* but change one letter to *kamilon*, well, that's the word for rope. That must be what Jesus meant; it's easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle... depending on the size of the rope and size of the needle's eye. Might work.

For a long time, the church has worked hard to avoid this difficult word. But I wonder if we can dispense with all of those mental gymnastics. We don't need to figure out a loophole or an exemption. We just say, "yeah, I'm not doing that."

So, if that is the case, if we know that none of us, not one of us, is going to sell what we have and give it to the poor, why waste our time reading a passage that all of us have decided is not for us? I have spend a lot of time with Mark's gospel because I find it to be meaningful and relevant and more days than not, it is my favorite gospel. No offense against Luke or John, they are great, but Mark speaks to me in a particular way. And over the years, one of the most surprising things about Mark's gospel is of all the people we meet in these pages, of all the disciples and religious leaders and others, I think the person I am most like is this rich man. Maybe not you. But I'm the one preaching today, so I get to tell you what I think.

I'm a lot like this guy. Now I don't think of myself as rich. Maybe few do. But compared to most people in the world and throughout history and compared to almost anyone Jesus would have known, including this man, I am rich. But my connection to this guy is deeper than that.

First, it says Jesus loved him. Of course, Jesus loved him. Jesus loved everyone. His capacity for love was limitless. But this is the only time in the gospel that it says out loud that Jesus loved someone. If it is only time these words are written, it must have mattered.

This is one reason I relate to this guy. I trust that the love of God revealed in Jesus is real. I trust it is a holy love that calls us all by name. You can write

your name in there when it says Jesus loved this person—Jesus loves me, this I know.

Secondly, this man was missing something. He runs to Jesus and kneels before him. He didn't just bump into Jesus at a coffee shop—"oh, while you are here, I have a question." No, he chases after him. He is desperate. He wants to know—no, he *needs* to know—what his life is for. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus says, "Well, what have you been doing?" He says, "I have kept Torah. I have done what I am supposed to do. I have lived the life my faith teaches me to live, but there is still something missing. There is a lack." Perhaps, a lack of joy.

I get that. We all know this circumstance. You are here, and you know that we can come to worship sometimes, maybe many times, and still there is something missing. We can try to live the life that faith teaches us and still find ourselves wondering: Have I got it right? There is a lack.

Jesus understands that. No wonder Jesus loved this man. He is doing what he knows to do, but still there is an emptiness. So, Jesus tells him: Sell what you have and give it to the poor. Now, how is that supposed to help anything?

If I understand the text, I think Jesus is trying to change the man's question. Do you remember it? What must I do to inherit eternal life? I think Jesus is saying: You are lacking something because your question is too small. Eternal life is too small.

Bear with me. If the man were to sell what he has and give it to the poor, how would he have done that in Jesus' day? Think about it. There was no Village Church Food Pantry you could donate to. There was no Thelma's Kitchen you could write a check to. There was no Artists Helping the Homeless that you could sponsor. In those days, if you wanted to help the poor, you would have to take something to them. If you wanted to feed the hungry, you would need to set an extra place at your table. You would have to know them and as you got to know them, you might come to love them, and it just might change what you want from life.

The man comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Here's the thing about this question: Eternal life is about me. It's about me going on and on and on. It may surprise you, but

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Jesus didn't talk about eternal life very much. What he talked about all the time was the kingdom of God—the promised day of God.

This man begins the conversation talking about eternal life, but Jesus changes the subject to the promised day of God. And I am not sure those are the same things.

Eternal life is about life continuing, not ending. The kingdom is about life being changed. Transformed. Jesus says to this man: You want to have joy? You want to have real life? You need to meet some people who don't want life to just go on. You need to get to know and come to love some people who want life to *change*, who need life to change. The idea that life never stops is not good news to many people in this world; it is their greatest fear. You get to know them and it will make you hungry for things to be different. You will not just want another day, you will want a different day.

I listened to an interview with Rev. Fyodor Raychynets. He is a pastor in Kyiv and teaches theology in the Ukrainian Theological Seminary. Last year his wife died from COVID. And then bombs started dropping on his city. Some who love him and live in other parts of Europe reached out to him and begged, "Come live here and be safe." But he said that he can't leave. Every day he takes food—I don't know how he gets the food—to people who are hiding in basements. He feeds them and he serves communion. He said, "I need to remind myself and to remind them while we are all in hell that we are still human beings. It is so crucial not to lose our humanity, but to preserve it and to show it and to demonstrate it because that's what the people need the most at this moment."

I think Fyodor Raychynets is a rich man who refused to go away sad. Oh, don't let me mislead you. I'm sure he's sad. I'm sure he is grieving. I'm sure

he is angry and bewildered. But I also wonder if he knows the joy that Jesus talks about. Because there in the midst of hell, he is living toward a better day, with all his muscle and spirit, he is living toward a promised day.

We all need a bit more joy in our lives. I think the source of our joy is tied to that promised day that Jesus always talks about—that promised day when we will remember that we are human beings and we will demonstrate our humanity. So on that day, we won't bomb little children anymore. And old folks won't hide in basements without food or water. No, in God's promised future we will not leave our neighbors on the streets and we will not push the poor to the margins. On that promised day, we will remember that we are human beings and we will demonstrate our humanity and justice and kindness will be the air we breathe.

Of course, we aren't there yet. There is so much pain in the world. And there is always a temptation to isolate ourselves from it all—to look away. And if you have enough resources, you can escape it better than most. If you have the resources, you can build your own castle to wall off the suffering of the world. But if we do, it's likely to leave us empty inside.

So to us, the well off, Jesus teaches: Find some sick people. Find some broken people. Find some lonely people. Find some people the world has passed by and meet them. Listen to them. Get to know them and you might even come to love them. And when you do, pay attention to what God does in you. It might change what you are longing for. It will no longer be enough to simply have another day; you will want a different day. You will plead for that promised day. And if God's promised day is our source of joy, then living toward that day may be the most joyful thing we can do today.

It's pretty bold but yeah, you want to do that.