

Riches and Heaven

Mark 10:17-27

Glasgow Presbyterian Church

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You ever been around a snooty rich person? There's an air of superiority there that *just rubs you* the wrong way! Especially the *nouveau riche*. When we look at these people, we figure "they've got everything," and we can dislike them intensely. You and I know what it's like to make hard decisions, because we don't have unlimited money; each of us has known what it was like to *really, really* want something, or possibly even *need* something – but not be able to afford it. So when we look at somebody who has it all, or at least appears to, there's that little something inside that kind of stirs around.

Then there's the power thing, too. Most rich people are also quite powerful, in one way or another. For a long time, we only voted into office presidents who came from wealth and privilege. And not just Presidents; people with megabucks can buy and sell whole companies, and therefore control thousands of people's lives. People with a lot of wealth can wall themselves in, separate themselves from others, really control their own destiny, and therefore their happiness. They don't lack anything that makes for happiness.

Or so it seems.

Consider the case of this rich man who presented himself to Jesus. We find out he's rich at the end of the story here in Mark; Matthew calls him simply "the young man," while Luke calls him "a certain ruler". Whatever, on sight his disciples and those with them recognized his wealth, maybe even because they knew him. But he's not a happy, peaceful guy here, which we see as the story unfolds.

In the first place, he *runs* to Jesus, which tells us something of his urgency – he needed to get this handled right away! It was just *killing* him. When he got to Jesus, he knelt down before him, and called him “Good Teacher”. You wouldn’t kneel down in front of a simple *teacher*, that’s for sure, even if he was a great one, because they didn’t have that kind of status. So we have to say that he recognized Jesus’ power. You WOULD kneel down as a sign to the person you’re addressing that you desperately need their help. There’s something *bothering* this man. It’s bothering him *a lot*. There’s almost a sense of panic here. And then we hear what the panic’s about: this rich man thinks he’s lacking something! Good heavens! In my perfect life, how can that be?

His opening words to Jesus are, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Poor, poor rich people! They think if there’s something out there they don’t possess, they have to have it. And they look at things in such *monetary* terms – talk about “inheriting” something is legal talk. Jesus, what can I do so that God will *owe* me eternal life?

Well, Jesus was no pushover for this rich guy. First, he does away with the flattery; his questioning of the questioner, and his affirmation that only God is good, that’s just Jesus saying to him that “flattery will get you nowhere.” Then Jesus says something that we’ve gotten used to hearing here, over the years, but that is really unusual, if you’re talking about money. “You know the *commandments*,” he says, and he names a few of them. Does this mean that obeying the commandments confers an inheritance of eternal life on someone?

The rich man must not have thought so; here he is asking Jesus to give eternal life to him, and yet he admits, "I have kept all these since my youth." I guess it *wasn't* enough; and so he waits expectantly for something more. We can only guess whether or not he waited impatiently, as some of these people do who have everything. Here was something he didn't have; here was something lacking, in an otherwise perfect life.

He was lacking something, all right; but nothing like what he'd thought. The text here says something powerful: Jesus looked on him, and loved him, our text says. Are you surprised? I mean, isn't this man's attitude exactly the kind of selfishness that makes us grit our teeth, especially from rich folks? You shouldn't be surprised that Jesus "loved him;" Jesus saw the potential in everyone to become a child of God, and he saw it in this man. "You lack one thing," he said. Then he laid the most *incredible* thing on him. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." It's incredible, because what does it say about his lack? And who would expect a rich person to do that, anyway? *Give away* stuff in order to *get* an inheritance? Who does that?

Who, indeed? Just as we cynical people would expect, this man wasn't up to THAT task; Mark records that he was "shocked" and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. The original language paints a picture of someone who was gloomy, whose face fell, or maybe even whose face darkened, when he heard the words of Jesus. But it's still confusing – what did he lack? Jesus didn't offer to *give* him anything, even any information. In thinking about it, I could only come up with one answer: he lacked a true relationship with God. He lacked it because his wealth got in the way.

Well, you know, that's where we have to start looking at this passage and seeing where it applies to us. The thing that was keeping this rich man from gaining eternal life was his lack of a real, personal relationship with God. He didn't have one because he could never let go of the *things of this world* so he could grab hold of God. We're not like that rich man in Mark's story, are we? – because we already know WE have inherited eternal life. I mean, WE HAVE a relationship with God. So, we have everything, and lack nothing, right?

I think each and every one of us here has areas of our lives where *we* hold onto things that keep us from God. One thing we *hold onto* is pride. What we *lack* is humility – the idea that we shouldn't see ourselves as better than another, but as an equal. Another thing we *hold onto* is our pleasure, available in so many varieties nowadays. What we *lack* is a sense of sacrifice, of not seeking pleasure but doing things that AREN'T fun, that do good for others. We *hold onto* our sense of who we are, our self-identity, and the rights we think WE have; we *lack* the insight to see ourselves as others see us, and to make the adjustments we need to make out of love. What areas of your own life are you "rich" in, that might cause you to be *lacking* in other areas? Not that we can answer that today – but when will we start answering it? We'd better start soon. Because when we lack these things, our relationship with God gets damaged, and maybe even destroyed. It definitely isn't helped!

Mark is obviously saying that *this man* isn't going to make it into the kingdom of God. Jesus turns to his disciples, and twice tells them how hard it is to enter heaven, especially for a rich person. And he uses the famous analogy of a camel through the

eye of a needle. One commentary says that there was a problem with the Greek here, that it should be ROPE through the eye of a needle, they just misspelled by one letter the Greek word for ROPE. That's wrong; Jesus *meant* to use this strange image. It was all about being impossible in a crazy way. Of course, his disciples were completely bamboozled again. "Then who can be saved?", they ask. And Jesus' reply was, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." This rich man, for all his troubles being stuck on wealth, could *still* make it into the kingdom of heaven. Why? *Because God wants him in his kingdom!* Those are the very words we need to take to heart today. I think you and I have it harder than any of the richest men of Jesus' day. We are bombarded with advertisements for all the things we *absolutely have to have*. We can buy those things now with the push of a button on a keyboard, or by simply picking up the telephone and dialing a toll-free number. Believe it or not, most of us have more *disposable* income – the kind that gets you into trouble, the kind that could block you from God – than those wealthy men of the first century in Palestine. There are so many demands on our time, and pulls and tugs on our pocketbooks, that we often have a hard time resisting the temptation to center ourselves on this world for our happiness, for our sense of what's important. We get so caught up in all of that, that we forget about our relationship with God, and we forget that, through Jesus, we have the inheritance that that rich man who knelt before him could never *earn*. In fact, we can't *earn* it either, but that's the beauty of it – we can only have it if we let go of our earthly ways, reach out in faith, and accept it. Now, is that impossible? NO! - because we have the Holy Spirit to warm our hearts, to lead us to the place, and especially, to

open our eyes, so that we can receive the gift. Impossible? For us in our own ways, yes. But for God - you can consider it already done. So enjoy being an heir of the kingdom, folks – and while you're at it, humble yourselves and pass it on.