

**“No chance on our own”**

**Mark 10:17-27**

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The 2010 Stewardship Team is already gearing up for Consecration Sunday, which is Sunday, November 22<sup>nd</sup> this year. Plans are being laid for a stewardship luncheon, for words of witness, for sermons. Even though we limit stewardship focus to three Sundays in late Fall, many people in church complain there are “just too many sermons about money”. There’s a reason for this, and the reason may surprise you. The reason is actually---Jesus. Jesus talked about money more than any other subject except the kingdom of God.

Some time ago I spoke to a friend of mine about this gospel. Tim used to be the chief fundraiser at Austin Seminary but now he works for another institution. Tim didn’t tell me this, but he might have if I had asked. *Jesus’ 100% giving strategy is doomed these days.* It probably didn’t go over too well back in Galilee, either. Unless you were only dealing with poor fishermen, who had a lot less to lose than this man with his Porsche and his portfolio and his penchant for Pinot noir.

Even though it’s about the last thing I would want to do, Tim says it’s easy to be a fundraiser. All he has to do is ask people for their wallet. He thinks the stewardship job is infinitely harder. We ask people for everything. Not just giving money, but giving all of themselves. Everything. Heart, mind, will, and wallet. And we do that, or we should do that, because it’s the gospel.

In this gospel, Jesus is on the road again, walking toward Jerusalem, walking toward his certain death. The man runs up to Jesus, and drops to his knees. His knees, for God’s sake! Can you see him? Politely clearing his throat: “Pardon me, Rabbi, may I have a word?” Then a question: “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Our man probably expects some reassurance from the Teacher. Some approving words to let him know he is on the right track. He’s used to hearing that he’s doing a good job.

But what the man *wants* from Jesus is not what the man *gets*. What starts out as a simple exchange turns in to dynamite. In talking to Jesus, this man does not know where he is. Kneeling in front of Jesus, he doesn’t realize he’s actually on holy ground. He has entered a realm outside the Law. He has stepped into far more dangerous and unpredictable territory. Into relationship with the living God.

We all know the gospel is supposed to be “good news”, but there’s at least two pieces of bad news in *this* gospel. Jesus rattles off a summary of the commandments, but it’s not *exactly* a summary of 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.’ But notice this. There are some curious changes. “Defraud” is not in the 10 commandments. The word in Exodus is “covet”.

And Jesus doesn't mention ALL the commandments. Which ones does he leave out? The first four. The ones having to do with right relationship with God. The ones that have to do with loving God first, above all else. With all your heart, mind, and will. Everything.

I think there is a reason Jesus doesn't mention the first four commandments. Jesus is making a point. This man has missed something big. He thinks he has dotted all his scriptural I's and crossed all his Torah T's. He has been in complete control all his life, and he wants to make sure everything is lined up for the afterlife, too. He's done all these things, but he has missed a central point, which is, *he cannot earn his salvation*. No way. No how. No matter what. Not a chance on his own.

Then we come to the part of this text that, if we paid more attention to it, would stun us. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Jesus loved him. We race over these six words, as if it weren't even there. ***Jesus loved him***. This is the only time in the gospels where we are told, straight out, that Jesus LOVED someone.

Inside the circle of his loving gaze, Jesus gently but firmly delivers the first piece of bad news to this man. "You lack one thing." *Only one?! Well, good, let me find out what it is. I have kept all these other rules since my youth, surely I can manage just one more? I wonder what I missed.*

"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven". *Sell everything? What? This isn't written in the Law. This is not what I expected!* The man had asked a question, expecting a rubber stamp of approval. He is stunned into silence. He shakes his head in sadness and confusion. This man is unable to move away from the field of economics and rules and Torah. Unable to see past the Law and look into the face of Love. Unable to accept the possibility, no, the IMPOSSIBILITY of a total love that requires everything: heart, mind, and will.

A total love that doesn't give a hoot about dotting I's and crossing t's. Imagine.

Imagine. A love that overflows into all areas of our lives. A love that energizes us, inspires us, enlivens us to the very core. Imagine. A love that enables us to move away from the letter of the Law. A love that breaks down barriers and rules and limits. Imagine. A love from which we cannot withhold anything! Imagine.

It is this kind of love Jesus talks to the rich man about.

Jesus prompts this man with love. Jesus gives five commands. Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow. To be a Christ-follower. Not about following rules, but about following Love. Not only about giving, but also about receiving.

What does it take to follow Jesus? It's not logical. Frederick Buechner talks about following without weighing the cost. He says, "This is the way that men [and

women, I would add] almost always make their overwhelming decisions. It is the comparatively minor decisions that take all the time and fuss”.

But, Buechner says, “on the really crucial decisions of life—Do I love her enough to marry her? Is it worth dying for?—when it comes to decisions like these, it is not just the pro-and-con-listing part of me that is involved. It is all of me, heart, mind, will”.<sup>1</sup> It’s not logical.

The question posed by the man in Mark’s gospel bears an uncanny resemblance to another gospel question. In Luke, a man runs up to Jesus with a question scribbled on his legal pad. “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus asks, “What is written in the Law?” “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself”. Jesus appeals to the Law, but it sounds different. It doesn’t sound like law at all. It sounds like. . .it sounds a lot like. . .Love. Impossible love.

After our rich man walks away, Jesus enlarges his loving gaze to include his disciples. With a second piece of perplexing, really bad news. “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” He repeats himself. “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” How hard it is for everyone. Everyone! The circle has gotten bigger. No longer is Jesus talking just to the wealthy, *he is talking to all of us*.

Then Jesus gives us a sermon illustration. “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”. So--- camel, needle. It’s impossible; we might as well walk away and forget it. We don’t stand a chance on our own. Not a chance. Impossible. And because it is so impossible, we (like the rich man) have walked away from this Word.

How have we done this?

We have tried to *spiritualize* this Word. We don’t need to take it literally (it really means we shouldn’t TRUST in money, not that we can’t KEEP our money. Or better yet, it’s not really about money at all. What it really means is we should beware of relying on our effort, our pride, our intellect.)

We have tried to *isolate* this Word. Surely it doesn’t apply to us. We are not wealthy; we are not so self-righteous in the same sort of way as this rich man. If Jesus were standing in front of us in the flesh, looking at us with love plastered all over his face, of course we would drop everything, hand over our bank accounts, toss our car keys to the nearest homeless person. Of course.

We have tried to *whitewash* this Word (oh yes, the “eye of the needle”?--that was the name of an ancient gate in Jerusalem? Hard for a camel to crawl through, but not

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, ‘The Magnificent Defeat’, p. 67.

impossible--- if you take off all the saddlebags and the camel is really small and gets down on its knees and scrunches through.)

Try as we might, we cannot wiggle our way *out from under the utter clarity* of this text. God wants all of us. And we cannot give it on our own.

Finally, after all this bad news, Jesus tells us some good news. Some really good gospel news. News about impossible possibilities. “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God, all things are possible”. We don’t have the power to follow him. That power comes only from loving God. We can’t even ask the right questions without the love of God. We can’t earn our way into kingdom living; we have to receive it. We can’t see past the road at our feet, let alone beyond that hill. But as Jesus marches toward that hill, He opens up a world of impossible possibilities---a hurricane is hushed; five loaves become 5,000; a blind man sees. In the circle of his loving arms, He welcomes children, and sinners, and rich people, and us.

The Love of God is good news for camels<sup>2</sup> everywhere.

The law of Moses is not the currency of exchange in the Kingdom. The law, with its prescriptions, the Decalogue, with its simple, yet impossibly difficult standards. This is not what Christ is asking for.

Neither is *currency* the currency of exchange in the Kingdom. Christ is not asking for all our money. No, he’s asking for more. He is asking for all of *us*. Heart, mind and will. Everything. He wants all our hopes and dreams, our desires and our passions. All the things that drive us.

He wants us to give ourselves to Love, to break our hearts in the work of compassion and justice, to stretch our minds to glorify God, to bend our will to God’s desire for us, our families, our work.

We have to give up things that slow us down on the hard road to redemption--- things like pride, and self, and the self-sufficiency that comes with our comfortable 21<sup>st</sup> century American lifestyle. We have to give up the idea that we can do this all on our own. We have to give up bargaining with God, withholding our stuff “just in case”, clinging to our false security, our own ridiculous recipes for well-being.

He asks us to empty our hearts to make room for his gift of Love. God knows if we remain hung up on our wallets, we won’t stand a chance at giving him our life.

He is a robber king, meeting us on the road. Demanding we unburden ourselves, lighten our loads, and join him and his ragtag band as they march inexorably forward to what looks like *Death*, but to what really is *Life*; to what looks like *Loss*, but to what really and truly is *Love*.

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<sup>2</sup> I think it was Will Willimon who used this particular turn of phrase, but I cannot find the reference.