

**Sunday, October 13, 2024**  
**21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22B)**

Mark 10.17-31

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/8577113525683450>

*(Sermon begins at about 24:20)*

**“Put Your Money Where Your Faith Is”**

Last week was the start of our annual stewardship campaign, with the theme of “Walk in Love.” Over a seven-week period we will explore, through reflections by parishioners, what it means for us to Walk in Love—with God and with our neighbors. We will explore what part St. Gregory’s plays in that walk of love. Or we could make it easy, reduce the stewardship campaign to one day by simply following Jesus’ directions to the rich young man: “sell what you own, and give the money to the poor.” Or in this case, give the money to the church. Let us take care of distributing it to the poor. After all, that is one of the primary ministries of the church.

Crazy talk? I don’t think so. It’s right there in the Gospel. Right there in Jesus’ own words. Sell all you have and give the money away. If we truly believe in Jesus, if we truly are his followers, isn’t that what we are supposed to do? If not, why would Jesus say it? Why would Mark feel it was important enough to put in his Gospel?

So, who’s gonna go first? Anyone?

Now, of course, what I suggest is, by and large, a preposterous notion. If we all sold everything we have and gave it to the poor, or to the church, then how would we live? We would then become among the poor that the church, other charitable organizations, and governmental programs are called upon to help. Adding to an already overburdened system of support for those in need. And yet, Jesus still tells the man, “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then [and only then], follow me.” Not just commanding him to do this outrageous thing but saying that it is a prerequisite for following Jesus. So what do we make of this tension between Jesus’ command and a seemingly untenable course of action?

Let’s take a look at the Gospel account and try to sort it all out. As we heard, a man comes to Jesus asking, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He obviously really wants to follow Jesus. He obviously wants to be part of the kingdom of God. Jesus then gives a list of laws that need to be followed. Essentially some of the Ten Commandments. Pretty standard stuff. The man responds that he already does all that. Jesus then drops the whammy: “[But] you lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me.” As we are told, the man was shocked. Who wouldn’t be? We are told that the man grieves because he had many possessions. Perhaps grieving at the prospect of having to give up all he has so as to pursue his dream of following Jesus? Or more likely, grieving because he is unwilling to do as Jesus instructs him, thereby killing his dream. And with that, he goes away, never to be heard from again.

Jesus then uses this as a teaching moment for his disciples: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” The disciples are obviously perplexed by this because at that time—and even among some today—wealth was viewed as a blessing from God. Wealth being viewed as a gift bestowed by God to those who are particularly favored. So if someone was blessed with riches by God, how could it be hard for them to be welcomed into God’s kingdom? And if those “obviously” blessed by God because of their wealth will have a hard time getting in, what about the rest of us? Yes, what about the rest of us? That is, after all, the question of the day.

Over time, this difficult passage has been interpreted in varied ways. As one commentator summarizes:

Not surprisingly . . . this passage has been one of the most controversial — and one of the most, um, “creatively” interpreted — in Christian history. Monastics point to it as the basis for a monk’s vow to poverty. Others insist Jesus only meant his advice to apply to the rich man himself; or only to the extremely rich; or only to a special inner circle of disciples. Still others argue that Jesus’ real concern here is “attachment” to wealth, not the mere possession of it; or that the story is ultimately meant to underscore that salvation comes not from human feats of piety, much less from material resources, but rather from God’s grace alone. Each of these options has merit.<sup>1</sup>

Admittedly, coming up with a coherent explanation is complicated, particularly given what little information we have in the Gospel. Although, knowing what we do about Jesus, I think it is likely the real meaning of today’s Gospel is a combination of things. I would argue that Jesus’ instructions were meant to apply only to the rich man and his particular situation—or those similarly situated—but that Jesus’ words to the rich man do, nonetheless, provide instructions to the rest of us. He’s not going to let us off that easy. Particularly those of us who would not be considered among the poor.

So, why would Jesus’ words really only apply to the rich man and those like him, and not to all who seek to follow Jesus? Several things: one general observation and one specific to the rich man himself. First, the general observation. Jesus’ instruction to “sell what you have, and give the money to the poor” is not a one-size-fits-all command for everyone. If it were, Jesus would have undoubtedly made that proclamation elsewhere and in much broader terms and contexts. Not the least of which would have been in the calling of his disciples. Nowhere in the call narrative does he instruct those he calls to be his disciples to sell everything and give the money to the poor. When he called Simon Peter and Andrew “Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him” (Mk 1.17-18). Similarly with James and John: a simple invitation to follow him. No other conditions. We know that they merely left their boats and nets by the shore, but didn’t sell everything off. In fact, there is evidence throughout the Gospels that they retained homes and other assets, and returned to them from time to time, including after Jesus’ resurrection.

Further evidence that those following Jesus did not sell everything and give the money away is found in the Acts of the Apostles, which reports the earliest Christian communities did sell their

assets, but did not give it away. They held the proceeds in common, distributing resources among their own members as needed (Acts 4.32-35). Providing for a truly communal-living situation. While a noble idea, not exactly what Jesus had in mind in speaking to the rich man.

Second is the specific observation about the rich man himself. In the lead up to his instructions to the man that he sell all he has, Jesus says, “You lack one thing.” Yet, he does not elaborate on what that “one thing” is. Is it faith? Is it moral virtue? Is it humility? Is it compassion? Is it generosity? Perhaps a combination of some or even all of these. The implication is that there is something standing in the way of the man being able to truly and completely follow Jesus. Something that is intertwined with the possession of wealth. Something that his wealth represents if not actually embodies. His wealth being a tangible, outward impediment to his experiencing whatever is lacking. In other words, his wealth being a barrier, a hinderance, to the man more fully becoming who he wants to be. To him embracing the qualities that are needed for him to become who he wants to be. That impede his ability to fully live into what it means to love God and love neighbor—the core values for life in the kingdom of God.

Bringing together these two observations leads us to the reasonable conclusion that Jesus’ instructions to the rich man were not meant to apply to all who seek to follow him, but rather, are case-specific. And yet, in the specific case of the rich man, we can glean that, like him, we are to examine our own lives, and particularly our relationship with our possessions, to determine if there is anything that might be getting in the way of us truly and completely following Jesus. The implication being that our relationship with our material possessions is an outward sign of our interior life. As has often been observed, if you want to know what a person truly believes, if you want to know what is truly important to them, look at how and where they spend their money. So, how and where do we choose to spend our money? And more importantly, what does that say about our values, our beliefs?

As Jesus discusses all of this with his disciples, he makes the comment, “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.” The disciples are greatly astounded at the implications: “Then who can be saved?” Good questions. Because the reality is, regardless of the amount of wealth we possess, we all have those things that can get in the way of our relationship with God. We all have those things that prevent us, at times, from being able to truly and completely live in alignment with the values of God’s kingdom; to truly and completely following Jesus. And quite often, wealth and material possessions—or rather, our attachment to them—are somewhere in the mix.

In light of this, the question remains, “Then who can be saved?” As Jesus responds to the disciples, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” We may not be able to make it into the kingdom of God on our own, but thanks to God’s love and God’s grace, we don’t have to worry about that. The good news of today’s Gospel is that God’s love and grace, not our own efforts, are the true and ultimate source of our salvation. Just as Jesus looked at the rich young man and loved him, he likewise looks at us and loves us for who we are. For what is in our hearts and our souls. In that love, he welcomes us into the kingdom of God. In so doing, he invites us to move beyond any concerns we have with our own inheritance. He invites us to overcome whatever may be lacking, whatever may be a hinderance to embracing what he offers. He invites us instead to live more fully into his love, to live more fully

into God's kingdom. He invites us to actively participate in the work of God's kingdom. One of the ways that we demonstrate our acceptance of that invitation is to give of ourselves, in all respects. Body, mind, and spirit, to be sure. But also, our time, our unique gifts and talents, and our financial and material resources. All given in support of the kingdom of God and in gratitude for our being invited in. All given as an outward sign of what we truly value, of what we truly believe.

There's an old saying: "put your money where your mouth is." While applicable to the rich young man, Jesus subtly reframes this adage ever so slightly, with the use of our financial resources becoming an indication, an expression, of our lives of faith. As Jesus welcomes us into his kingdom, he invites us to put our money where our faith is.

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<sup>1</sup> "Faith & Money: SALT's Commentary for Twenty-First Week after Pentecost," SALT, October 7, 2024. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/twenty-first-week-after-pentecost-lectionary-commentary>.