

Mark 10:17-31

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know 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.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “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.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

28 Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

The Word of God

The Word of Life

The O'Jays sang, "Money, Money, Money, Money. Some people got to have it, yeah."

So, I just finished talking about divorce last week. This week, the lectionary, that schedule of passages on a three-year cycle I follow with many mainline pastors, hits me with Money!

For many of us, it is a super-sensitive subject because it concerns our security and privacy. And so many think we don't need a preacher to start in on it. As one dear saint said, when the preacher started in on money again. "You've done quit preachin' and gone to meddlin'."

But as I read somewhere this week, one theme of this passage is our relationship with money, so while it may be about more than money, it is undoubtedly about our relationship with money or for us; if not money, then whatever keeps us from living the faithful life we desire.

I'll admit I don't have a good relationship with money. Like divorce, this stirs me up in ways left over from my childhood and the death of my father, when I was told my relatives only wanted me to come and live with them for my father's money. It wasn't until many years later that I learned the truth. The person who told me that my relatives only wanted me for my father's money was the one with money issues. Still, since then, I have not had a good relationship with money.

Oh, I understand it. I have taken many accounting courses and worked as an unemployment insurance auditor, but emotionally, I still have problems with it. So, like last week, I must wrestle with this passage and see if it produces a blessing.

The story begins with Jesus on his way to Jerusalem to meet his final destiny with the cross and resurrection.

A sincere young man runs up to him and respectfully kneels before him. He wants to know what he must do to make his home with God now and forever. How can I obtain eternal life? He wants to know what he has to do.

Jesus says to keep the commandments, especially regulations that govern human interactions and adds, "Do not defraud anyone." The young man believes he has done that, and to be fair, the Jewish people of Jesus' time believed one could keep the commandments. So, hypocrisy is not the issue. However, he may not see where he has missed the mark like many of us; we all have blind spots.

I think he mistakenly assumed he could do something to ensure he obtained eternal life. We know that eternal life in this world and the next is a gift God gives. We need to remember it is not something we earn. Jesus sees this young man needs to do one more thing to prepare his heart to receive the gift.

Looking at him with love, Jesus replies, "But you lack one more thing. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor." "In doing so, you will have treasure in heaven, and then come follow me." The young man goes away sad because he has a great many possessions.

Jesus knew just where to challenge him with these direct, hard words. He is so direct because he loves him. And sometimes, it takes someone who loves us to help us see our blind spots.

In addition, Jesus is on his final countdown. He is on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill his destiny and doesn't have time for half-hearted followers. Right now, he needs people who are all in. "I need all of you without distractions," Jesus said to the young man.

The young man did hear and understand Jesus, but he went away sad because he was wealthy. Even though he walked away in sadness, I have always wondered whether he later changed his mind, did what Jesus said, and returned to follow him. We don't know, but I want to believe that he did.

So, while Jesus was forcefully direct with this young man, what do we make of these words for our lives today? I hear the gospel speaking in hyperbole to us. This is not the first time Jesus is over the top, as we have heard: If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. He speaks like this to get people's attention, which he clearly does. The command to sell all you have and give the money to the poor gets our attention.

One of the things often said about the church is that it is always talking about money. Indeed, the church turns many people off and they say it spends too much time talking about money.

In one sense, that is as it should be because it may interfere with our faithfulness and spiritual development. And Jesus spends more time talking about money and its use than he does talking about prayer.

Jesus addresses one of our most sensitive spots: money, possessions, and things. Sell all you have, give it to people experiencing poverty, and come follow me, Jesus says.

But I do want to point out that he didn't say sell all you have and give it to the church, sell all you have and help the pastor get a new jet plane and mansion, or at least send him to the Meeting of the Minds in Gulf Shores, Alabama, a gathering of Jimmy Buffett fans. He says to give it to people experiencing poverty. Meeting the needs of hurting people is the call of Jesus.

One writer said, "Don't let people off the hook." Jesus **is** talking about wealth and possessions, and for many, that keeps them from a deeper, more faithful life. But I don't see that as a major problem for our church. You are already so generous that I don't think selling all we have is the one thing we lack. I have always sensed generosity at the center of your hearts in this church. So, we probably don't let money stand in the way of our relationship with God.

We know that pursuing wealth and the stuff it provides drives so much of our society and fuels the need to produce, consume, and have more. Lacking wealth and possessions can cause us to see ourselves as failures or at least less than fulfilled. Many may tend to measure themselves by what they have.

Still, for many of us, it is that we lack something else.

Jesus says to us, "You lack one thing." What do we lack? What is that one thing we must get rid of? What stands between us and God? As Jesus says, "What is that one thing that holds you back?" For this man, his possessions stand in the way of total faithfulness. What is it for us?

Like this man, we all have something that stands in the way of our faithfulness. For him, it is his wealth. And each of us must ask, "What is it for me? What in my life keeps God at arm's length?"

Jesus wants us to see that, whether it's wealth or something else, we must not let anything separate us from the life God calls us to.

We must ponder the one thing we lack that keeps us from faithful living.

Jesus again uses hyperbole to make the point. In exaggeration, Jesus continues. "Indeed, it is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone rich to enter the kingdom of heaven."

There used to be an old tale that there was a Jerusalem gate called the Needle Gate of Jerusalem, and it was so small that a camel would have to be unloaded from all it was

carrying to enter the gate. That's what Jesus meant for us to see, like that camel; we need to get rid of that stuff, the baggage that keeps us from eternal life. It's a great story, and I have heard it for a long time, but it comes from the 9th Century not Jesus' day. There never was a Needle Gate in Jerusalem, but the image captures the truth that we need to unburden ourselves and unload that which keeps us from entering a deeper relationship with God.

The camel image helps us remember that the camel can't unburden itself of its load; it needs help, and so do we. And neither can we. If just discarding that one thing was easy, we would do it, but that one thing holding us back from a deeper relationship with God won't be easily cast aside. It has a hold on us and sometimes feels like a stranglehold. Often, it is an essential part of who we are.

If the rich can't obtain the kingdom, what hope is there for anyone? For in scripture, wealth was often seen as a blessing. If the rich can't enter the kingdom. If we need to get rid of that one thing that won't let us go and we can't, who can be saved? Jesus says what we can't do alone is just what God does. Without this unburdening, true spirituality eludes us. But good Presbyterian theology proclaims God does for us what we can't do for ourselves. God is there at the metaphorical Needle Gate, helping us unload our burdens so we can enter God's presence.

I think this is the heart of the passage: whatever our one thing is, we can't let go of it without God's help, for that which we can't get rid of, God can.

Peter says, "We have given up everything for you," and Jesus says, "Yes, you have." However, it must be added that the disciples who claim to be all-in vanish in the days to come as his arrest, torture, and execution become a reality.

So, they all let fear and lack of help to burden them. It takes the risen Lord to come back to them and say, "Fear not," and lift the shame they feel. When Jesus needed them, they were not there, so they felt deep shame. It's worse than guilt. It is not "I did something wrong." but the feeling that "I am wrong or defective." For many of us, shame, the sense that there is something wrong with us, keeps us from God. We believe even God can't remove our shame.

But the gospel's truth is that what is impossible for us is possible for God, and what we can't remove, God can.

I wonder what Jesus would say to us: the one thing you lack is.... The one thing that keeps you from being fully committed is....

I don't think it is my possessions. I feel like I can sing with Jimmy Buffett.

But now, times are rough.

And I got too much stuff...

I don't think possessions are the one thing I lack, and this passage prompts me to do some soul-searching. What stands in the way of a more profound, more faithful commitment to Jesus? I think for me the feeling is that I am not good enough in so many ways.

Even though I know we are all good enough in God's eyes, I am good enough.

What is the one thing you lack?

To resolve this, we need to do two things. First, we must honestly identify what holds us back from a more faithful life. This will take some time for deep prayer and discernment. Second, turn that one thing over to God and trust that God can release us from what keeps us from full faithfulness and a deeper, more blessed life. God will help us become unburdened by what separates us from God's loving kingdom and eternal life.