

Bible Study Guide: Week of 10-4-2021

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As [Jesus] 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?” ¹⁸Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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.’” ²⁰He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” ²¹Jesus, 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.” ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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

²⁸Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

¹⁷As [Jesus] 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?”

In Mark 1:40, this verb for someone kneeling before Jesus occurs in the context of a leper kneeling and begging for healing. The same verb comes in in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 17) in the context of a man asking for Jesus to heal his epileptic son. Another verb, with a similar meaning (to prostrate oneself) comes up frequently in the gospels when people are seeking out Jesus for healing. This man seems to recognize Jesus as one in authority and as one with the capacity to grant something that he wants or needs, in this case (it seems) eternal life. The man’s question is somewhat oxymoronic—one doesn’t inherit by *doing* anything. One inherits because of the death of someone else and by virtue of relationship with the one who has died.

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Jesus’ response skips over the question itself and instead addresses the man’s respectful address of Jesus as “good teacher.” In a sense, Jesus is asking the man, “do you actually know who I am?” Ironically, the man assumes Jesus is a teacher, but doesn’t realize that Jesus is the very presence of God with him. Jesus continues, listing the commandments. The man responds that he has kept all of these since his youth. Christians often caricature the Jewish understanding of the law. We assume the man must be dishonest or boastful because we often depict the law as impossible to keep. In the Jewish understanding of the law, it is a joy and privilege to keep the law, not a burden or obligation. Therefore, the man is probably speaking honestly—he has walked in the ways of Moses since his younger days, striving to love his neighbor as himself.

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Jesus' reaction to the man ("he loved him") underscores the fact that the man is speaking the truth about his own keeping of the law and that Jesus accepts his answer. But Jesus also sees more: this man still lacks one thing. And what is it that he lacks? Jesus himself. He must follow Jesus. In order to do so, he would have to divest of whatever possessions would hold him back from following Jesus. Jesus is on a journey—to Jerusalem and to the cross and empty tomb. Jesus knew there would be no time for his followers to tend to matters of business and property in the days ahead. So he told the man to get rid of all that would hold him back. The man's reaction is rendered as "shocked" here, but would be better translated as gloomy. This same adjective was used to describe a cloudy sky—dreary, gloomy, "in a funk" might be a better way to put it than "shocked." The man is having a crisis of faith—he knows what he must do to follow Jesus, but he can't bring himself to do so because he has too much invested in his possessions.

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Here, the disciples are operating under the cultural assumption that those with great wealth and many possessions were especially favored by God. We often subconsciously make the same assumptions in our own day and age. So from that perspective, if the rich (those favored by God as evidenced by their nice things) can't make it into the kingdom, who can? Jesus reminds them that God's ways are not the same as the ways of the world.

It is worth noting that a 9th century interpreter devised a story about a gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle" which a laden camel could not enter. Only a camel who was stripped of her or his cargo and stooped low could enter this gate. Sometimes this story gets used to soften the blow of this story or otherwise explain Jesus' hyperbolic idiom. The only problem is such a gate never existed. Further, it is exactly like Jesus (who earlier advocated amputation of offending body parts) to use hyperbolic language to get across his meaning. Jesus really means a literal camel and a literal needle here. The absurdity of this image gets at the heart of the difficult predicament wealth can leave us in—so convinced of our own self-sufficiency we can't see our need for others or for God's grace.

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Peter pipes in to express that the disciples (unlike the man who bowed before Jesus) have managed to turn loose of possessions, family, and livelihood to follow Jesus. Jesus assures them that they will gain back what they have lost in this world. By this, he means that the new community (the church) will replace and restore those things that were lost. Yet, he warns, these things will come with persecutions. That is, the life of faith will not be without challenges and setbacks. He ends this shocking section with a classic aphorism of kingdom reversal—the first shall be last and the last first.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Do you think Jesus' call to the wealthy man applies to all would-be followers of Jesus? Why or why not?**
- 2. Why do you think Jesus says it is so hard for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God?**
- 3. In what ways do we still associate wealth with honor and poverty with shame in our own culture?**