



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
November 3, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Saved from what?"

Mark 10:17-31 (NRSV)

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?"

Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 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.'"

He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."

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." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

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!" 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! 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."

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

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 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

“Saved from what?”

I saw a comic strip a few months ago on social media, of a pastor in front of his congregation. He’s a short, bald fellow, round spectacles, looks like someone you’d come across in a Cathy or Dilbert comic. In the first panel, he reads from Scripture:

“And Jesus said, ‘Give all you have to the poor and follow me.’”

The next panel is a close-up right on the pastor in the pulpit. He looks up from the Bible. A bit of sweat flies off his forehead. He looks uncertain.

And in the last panel, the comic zooms out. You see him again up in the pulpit. The congregation sits in pews below. He says,

“Today I shall explain why Jesus didn’t really mean that.”

And you see little thought bubbles all-round the congregation, saying: “Whew; Whew; Whew.”

I thought really highly of myself, when I read that. I even went so far as to share it with a few friends. Because, I’m not that guy; no one wants to be that guy:

- The preacher who smooths out the hard-hitting social justice messages of Scripture;
- The guy who says Jesus didn’t really mean all that about giving to the poor.

Of course, Jesus meant what he said, and I preach that, right? And then, I saw this week the lectionary lands here, on the rich man; and the camel; and the needle; and I thought, ‘Oh, darn.’

Because no one wants to be the guy who ignores the hard message of Scripture, but you know who else you don’t want to be? I don’t want to be a hypocrite, either, who tells the congregation that Jesus commands us to sell all we own, and then I go home in my car, and take a nap on my couch, in the home that I own.

Let's face it, I'm not going to get rid of any of those things today. If I did, I wouldn't be able to show up here next week. Because Lindsey, my spouse, would kill me. I mean, we just moved in last year, and you know how hard it is to find a decent place in Knoxville.

No one wants to be the hypocrite; and no one wants to be the pastor who ignores what Jesus actually says. It's a rock and a hard place.

'Well, who then can be saved?' asked the disciples.

This rich man gets a bad rap, by the way, for walking away from Jesus. He comes off a bit pathetic. But that's not how Scripture wants us to imagine him. Mark was the first to write up the account. Matthew and Luke got it from Mark but they added their own spin on the story. And they all do their best, to make him look good. For example, Matthew adds the detail that the man was not only rich but he was young. Luke adds that he was not only rich and young, but he was also a ruler. So, in our imagination, we put all this together, and collectively we call this the story of the rich, young ruler.

He's the type of guy who seems to have it all figured out. Dripping with confidence, rightly earned, he is also sincere and authentic. If you saw him on the street, you couldn't help but like this guy. He's 1980s Patrick Swayze; he's 1990s Brad Pitt. He is so put together, and so sure of himself.

And he's nothing but polite. He enters this story with a bow and calls Jesus "Good teacher." Maybe, he himself is used to being called good – I mean, he's young, he's rich, he follows all the commandments. Maybe he even expects Jesus to return the compliment, after he asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But if you or I are meant to be impressed with this fellow, Jesus sees through this display of flattery, and he gets annoyed: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone?" he spits back.

Isn't that a weird thing for Jesus say? If you read the Gospel of Mark, it's pretty clear the overall message is, in fact, that Jesus is good. But Jesus just loses his cool with this guy; he doesn't buy his shtick.

That's the thing with rich young rulers; they've got a shtick. They believe their own press. Everyone tells them how good they are, and they start to believe it. You can tell, this guy believes it. "Ever since I was young, I've kept the

commandments,” he says. The rich man believes in his goodness so much, he thinks he can earn his way into the Kingdom of God: “Good teacher, what can I do ... to inherit eternal life?”

That’s why Jesus claps back at him, with “No one is good but God.” Because Jesus knows, the Kingdom of God isn’t something you earn, no matter how good you are.

This story begins in Mark, chapter 10, verse 17. Just a few verses earlier, in chapter 10, verse 15, Jesus has blessed the little children, and says, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not *receive* the Kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” Jesus knows, the Kingdom of God is not something you earn; it’s something you receive like a child; it’s a gift. It’s grace. The rich, young ruler asks the wrong question: “What can I do?” But Jesus has just told everyone, “The Kingdom is not about what YOU do; it’s what you receive; it’s about what God does.”

Why does the rich young ruler ask this question then?

And here’s where the fact that he’s rich comes into play. Because in the world of rich and poor, have’s and have nots, this rich young ruler has come out on top. And he thought he could do the same, in the Kingdom of God.

A couple of Sundays ago, we talked about spiritual cliches, sayings that sound religious but aren’t actually found anywhere in Scripture. Things like, “Everything happens for a reason.” Here’s another one, not just prevalent today, but also in Jesus’s time; the spiritual cliché that “God helps those who help themselves.”

The prosperity gospel says that God gives good things to those who deserve them. And it’s not just Joel Olsteen who believes that. It was this rich man too. The rich young ruler is the poster child for the cliché, “God helps those who help themselves.”

This man’s riches had taught him that he was deserving: “What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of God?”

And so, Jesus says, that to be saved, he has to give his riches away. You see, what Jesus is saying, is that to enter the Kingdom of God, he has to let go of the idea that he can earn his way in. He’s got to give up the idea, that “God helps those who help themselves.” He’s got to give up the idea, that God’s love and favor is something he deserves and can earn.

And the man walks away, because his entire identity was built on the fact, that he had earned all that he had; and ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ That’s why Jesus says, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” How hard it is, for those of us, who believe we have earned all that we have, including God’s favor.

Do you ever think God’s favor is something you earn?

Even the disciples are astounded. If this guy, who works so hard, who seems to have earned so much, can’t earn his way into the Kingdom, then Jesus, “Who can be saved?”

But that’s the thing about the Kingdom of God. It doesn’t operate on the same economy, as the haves and the have nots.

All this week, I’ve been thinking about the relationship, between the Kingdom of God, and this economy we have, of the haves and the have nots. Let me tell you just a bit about my week:

On Monday, I met with our new major projects task force. This group is deciding, which, of the large and expensive projects our church needs to undertake to make this building functional and sustainable for all the generations who call it home now and in the future.

- We have roofs that need repair;
- HVACs nearing their limit;
- Stairways inaccessible to those with mobility challenges;
- A playground too small for our numerous and giant children.

There’s so much opportunity, so much that we can do.

And it’s going to take money.

On Tuesday, I met with the stewardship team, who is devising a campaign to raise enough money to keep the doors open and the lights on and, even more, to fund another year of life-giving ministry at Westminster. That is no easy task in 2024. It’s going to take over a million dollars.

I was off on Wednesday, thanks be to God.

But then on Thursday, the men of the church met for breakfast. And Larry Ridley led us in an amazing, and heartbreaking, and anxiety-inducing conversation about saving for retirement. Did you know, that there is a retirement crisis in this country.

1 in 5 Americans today over the age of 50 have not saved anything for retirement; 1 in 4 of us are on track to poverty when we reach retirement age; and 60% of Americans fear running out of money before they die.

By the way, I was the only person not at retirement age at the breakfast. I didn't appreciate all the awkward glances thrown my way, guys, as those statistics were thrown out.

And then Friday, I wrote this sermon, on the rich young ruler. The one whom Jesus told to go and sell all that he owned.

I realized, the economy that we live in, is one of scarcity. It's an economy, where there's never enough to feel fully secure. It is an economy of competition; because there's not enough, not enough, never enough.

And spiritual cliché, that 'God gives to those who help themselves,' is a lie that says God abides by the rules of that economy; that God believes in the idea of scarcity, and that God's love is just another competition, just another thing to earn.

And that is draining. This economy leaves great swaths of this world in destitution, and even those of us lucky enough to make it, like this rich young man, exhaust ourselves always trying for more. The rich young ruler had everything and yet he was looking for something more. Are you looking for something more?

But you know what else I realized, after a week thinking about church finances and the rich young ruler? I realized, the Kingdom doesn't abide by the rules of the haves and the have nots.

This Kingdom isn't about accumulation.

This Kingdom is about grace:

- In the Kingdom of God, there is a community, where property and resources are shared instead of hoarded.
- In the Kingdom of God, you measure your wealth in what you can give, so much more than what you receive.
- In the Kingdom of God, you are more than the things you own.
 - And your security is in who you are, not what you have.
 - And your value is defined, not by acquisition, but rather by the abundant grace, already given to you, that names each of you, as a child of God.

You see, maybe we can't stop living in the economy of this world, but by grace, the Kingdom of God changes how we live in it. That's what it means to be saved.

Saved from the rat race, saved from an unquenchable hunger for more, saved by realizing our worth is measured, not by what we have, but what we share, and who we share it with.

Saved, by realizing salvation is not something you earn or inherit or buy.

In fact, it's not something you gain by acquisition at all.

You are saved, instead, by letting go.

Letting go of the idea that God's love is something you earn.

Or that there's not enough of it to go around.

Just look around you – this community, this way of life, this belief that we are more, so much more than our stuff.

It's all already here.

When you stop and look around you, you see:

It is all already here.

It's all already here.

And it is enough.

The Kingdom of God.

Amen.