

“It Is Hard”

Mark 10:13-31
January 28, 2007

What is really important to you?

If we asked children during the children’s time what was really important, we might get answers like, “love,” or “God,” or “Jesus.”

When I was an intern at La Crescenta Presbyterian Church a few years back, one of my colleagues gave me the inside scoop on how to make a successful children’s sermon. “It’s all in the questions you ask,” she told me. “If you ask questions where ‘Jesus,’ ‘love,’ or ‘God’ are the answers, the kids look faithful and the parents think it is adorable.” It is true. I have never heard anyone complain about a children’s sermon when those three answers – or two out of three, anyway – have been the primary responses the kids give. Try anything else and you take your chances.

What is really important to you? “Love,” “God,” “Jesus.”

Imagine, however, if we asked that question to the children at the front gates of Disneyland. How might the answers differ as they consider the tickets you have put in their hand? That is the question this morning, what is really important?

Unlike last week, where a back story had a big impact on understanding why it was part of the gospel, this week is pretty much right there on the surface.

Mark 10:13-31.

1. Calling a rich man to faith.

This story strikes a little close to home. This guy could be sitting in any one of the pews out there. He is a product of the church, he is successful within the church, and he just wants to make sure he has all his bases covered. This is a guy that we would all admire, a guy who we would think has it all together.

So what happened?

Why did this man go away crestfallen and dismayed?

The short answer is this: Jesus told the man to “come, follow me.” Leave the blessings, leave the wealth, leave everything that shows success and – in many eyes – God’s blessing. Leave those things and simply “come, follow me.”

When he could not do so, Jesus turned and told the disciples, “It is hard.”

2. The Question and Answer

Let us slow down and look at how this encounter takes place. Jesus sets out on a journey. The man *runs* and then *kneels down* before Jesus. So far, so good. It is a sign of respect, a sign of his genuine desire to present himself before Jesus that he does these things. The first thing out of his mouth is a word of glorification and adoration, “Good teacher.” This is not a common courtesy, it is not like saying, “Professor,” or “Mr.” or even, “Your Honor.” There really was no parallel or tradition that would justify such an address to an individual; thus, that this man so eloquently addressed Jesus is remarkable.

For what it is worth, Jesus’ question, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone,” has puzzled Christians for generations. It could be like Peter’s confession – “how did you know to call me good?” It could be a test – “do you really mean what you are saying or was that flattery?” It could be a preview of the revelation of the resurrection – “yes, I am the incarnate God who is good.” Which is it? We do not know. There are some mysteries we are just simply going to have to live with until we get a chance to ask face-to-face.

But the man’s question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” is the crux of the matter. To the man’s credit, he asks the right question. He is interested in the truly important thing.

The rest of this encounter is an answer to the question. Jesus recognizes the man’s devotion to the law. With him, Jesus reviews the relational commands from the second tablet of the Ten Commandments: do not murder, do not commit adultery (coming right after the previous lesson regarding divorce), do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, and honor your father and mother. Two digressions here:

- According to Exodus, Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai the Ten Commandments on two tablets. According to Jewish tradition and thought, one had the first four commands and the remaining six were on the second. The first tablet contained the commands concerning the relationship with God, the second contained the commands concerning the relationship among each other.
- Because the man had many possessions, Jesus substitutes defraud for covet; figuring that someone wealthy enough to have comfort in possessions is unlikely to struggle with coveting.

The man would not have been surprised by this kind of answer from Jesus. This emphasis on the keeping of the Law was consistent with Jewish faith and tradition. In fact, it was understood that there would be earthly reward for keeping the law. So far, the man must think, I am doing well. He reports this to Jesus. These things I have kept since my youth; that is, since the time he became accountable for obeying the law.

Jesus looks at him. You get the feeling that this was one of those looks that cuts right through the man. Jesus takes a moment to look deep into the man’s soul, into his heart.

If ever you have had one of these moments in your life, you know how humbling it can be. Without a word, you have the sense that your whole life – even the things that you have never

shared with anyone, even the things you most want to keep hidden – is visible. It takes your breath away. It is humbling because there is no hiding the bad behind the good. It is all there in the light. That's what we call a "come to Jesus" moment.

And, here's an interesting little note: Jesus loved the man. He did not get angry with him for having possessions. He did not condemn him for following the law. He did not rebuke him for misunderstanding theology. Jesus loved him.

But his response shows the radical nature of what God wants from us: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me."

What does the man lack? The heart to follow Jesus first. All else is secondary. The riches in heaven are not a throwaway line from Jesus, but they put the cart before the horse. In order to inherit eternal life, you have to follow Jesus.

The man loved the blessings more than he loved the one who gave him the blessings. Let me say that again: he loved the blessings more than the one who gave him the blessings.

3. The Assurance of Faith

Jesus turns to the disciples and says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Peter and the disciples are astonished by this encounter and Jesus' words. It seemed to stand in contrast to what they had always understood: if God blesses you and you are a good person and you follow the commandments, wealth and possessions are a sign of God's pleasure. Why, then, would you not be welcome in the kingdom of God?

(Does that sound familiar? "If I am a pretty good person and I did my best, I think God will let me into heaven.")

Jesus repeats, "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" The talk about the kingdom of God is significant. Remember, the first half of the gospel was about answering the question, "Who is this?" Peter sums it up, "You are the Christ." Now, Jesus is fully engaged in the work of the Son of God, which is to usher in 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." The camel, being the largest animal in the nearby vicinity, would have great difficulty going through the smallest of small openings. When I was younger, some suggested that the "eye of the needle" was the name of a gate leading into Jerusalem, so that this was not as big a feat as might be imagined. Not true. Jesus really means a full size camel and Jesus really means the eye of a needle.

It cannot be done from a human perspective. There is absolutely nothing we can do to make a camel fit through the eye of a needle. We can work, we can study, we can try everything and it does not change the fact that we cannot do it. Oh, how we want to be able to do it, to prove that we are worthy of being let in!

Then who can be saved? “With mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” How is it possible? It is possible because of what God does. It is possible because Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to fulfill the work of the Son of God, redeeming humanity by his death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Peter, speaking for the disciples, says, “OK, but what about us? We left everything and followed you.” Yes, how about that? Jesus response promises the rewards of discipleship.

The rewards of discipleship are plentiful. One commentator noted that “God takes nothing away from a man without restoring it to him in a new and glorious form.” (William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary). Jesus tells them that they will receive “one hundred fold” for everything they gave up.

This text has been the springboard for what we call, “prosperity preachers.” You may have seen them on television and you have probably heard them talk about this passage and the rewards that come “in this age and the age to come.” “God wants you to be wealthy!” they cry. “Send money to me and I will pray that God bless you with money, with possessions, with all the good things this life has to offer.”

The problem with prosperity preaching is that it misses the whole point of the passage. The gifts in this age and the age to come refer to the inheritance that comes from being a child of God through the grace of Jesus Christ. The love is for Christ, not for the blessings that come from Christ – that’s exactly what the rich man lacked!

The families and the houses and the fields all exist – really. Look around you. See your brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers. This is the family of God, a hundred-fold. We belong to each other. What we have as possessions we have as stewards blessed by God; we share those things together. We will see this all the more clearly in the age to come but we see it even now. (By the way, note that there will be persecutions in this age and not in the age to come. One of the rewards of discipleship is that you will not endure the persecutions and hardships of this age alone – you have been made a part of a family that will endure these things with you!)

4. Receiving the Kingdom of God like a little child

But our text this morning began with children. It began with the disciples rebuking those who were bringing their children to Jesus for blessing. Jesus was “indignant,” the Scripture says, and rebuked the disciples for preventing the children from coming.

“Truly I tell you,” he said, “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

What distinguishes children from the rich man? It is the same thing that distinguishes children from adults today: children are unable to provide for themselves and they know it. Adults often run under the perception that they *can* provide for themselves.

Economies turn, industries change, markets collapse, competitors advance. Lose your job and see how quickly that notion of self-sufficiency disappears.

Accidents happen, illnesses occur, and forgetfulness sets in. Lose your health and see how quickly the notion of self-sufficiency disappears.

Banks fail, thieves steal identities, insurance refuses claims for losses in natural disasters. Lose your money and see how quickly the notion of self-sufficiency disappears.

Aren't those happy thoughts? But the point remains real: we are not able to provide for ourselves. We can be good stewards, we can do our best, but the reality is that we are not nearly in control as we would let on to ourselves.

Little children, on the other hand, know that they are powerless and need to rely on the grace of others. They trust their parents, they love their parents, and they need their parents. This does not always manifest in obedience. In shopping malls across the country and across the world today, parents will say to their children, "OK, I'm going." The child will stay put until the parent starts to walk away. There will be a momentary tension between following and whatever has captivated their attention, but most children will quickly give up everything to follow their parent.

Studies of children show that the greatest concern is "who will take care of me?" They know they cannot make it on their own. For adults, "how can I provide for myself?"

Jesus instruction to the man to "sell all his possessions and give them to the poor," is not his advice to everyone. He looked at the man's heart and saw that he valued those things more than the one who provided them for him. Jesus next instruction, "Come, follow me," is his command for everyone.

It is the summation of the first command, "You shall have no other gods before me." It is the summation of the great command, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength."

Jesus is telling the disciples and telling you and me that there is no other way to enter the kingdom of God than what God has provided. There are no other doors, no other windows, no other openings, no other ways than that which God has provided.

Conclusion:

What is really important? Love God. Love, Jesus. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus says, "Come, follow me."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

8:15 offering

10:00 offering