

“Where Your Blanket Is”

Mark 10:17-31 ¹

You may remember that our son, Nathan, lives in Portland, Oregon with his family. More than a decade ago, Nathan and I had dinner in Portland with Jill’s sister’s daughter, Ellen, who was then a freshman at Reed College. I was unfamiliar with Reed prior to Ellen’s study there, but it is apparently well known as one of the most intellectually elite colleges in our nation.

While surfing Reed’s website, I was interested to learn that Barbara Ehrenreich is a Reed alum. Barbara wrote one of the most provocative books I read in grad school: *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*.²

In that book Ehrenreich argues that the central psychological dynamic in the American middle class is a fear of economic insecurity that leads to selfish and acquisitive lifestyles. That’s probably more true today than it was when she wrote the book; and remembering that book reminded me of a *Peanuts* cartoon.

In this particular cartoon, Linus is sucking his thumb and holding his blanket when Snoopy dashes by and clamps the blanket in his teeth. Snoopy then dashes out the door, dragging Linus with him. There’s deep snow on the ground, and Linus trips and falls in the snow, whereupon Snoopy pounces on him, trying to get the blanket. Next the two of them have a tug-of-war on a mountain of snow, in the process of which Linus falls down the mound and lands upside down in the snow . . . but with his blanket!

As Linus runs back inside, Lucy says, “Are you crazy? You could catch pneumonia rolling around out there in the snow!” To which Linus responds, “**The struggle for security knows no season.**” Linus’s reply might be restated as “**Where your blanket is, there your security will be also,**” a paraphrase of Jesus’ famous principle that “*Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will also be*” (Matthew 6:21).

The rich man who accosted Jesus in this morning’s text could easily have been a graduate of Reed College. Whatever his background, it was clear from his dress and bearing that he was accustomed to privilege. We’re not told how old he was, but my guess is that he was at least in his thirties, because it usually takes at least that long for us to discover how empty wealth is by itself, how absolutely powerless money is to satisfy the deep desires of our hearts. Some folks are much older than their thirties when they finally learn this . . . and some never do.

I suspect that most of us tend to write off this story as not pertaining to us, since we do not regard ourselves as “rich” or as “wealthy”; but let’s think about that for a moment. No matter how much money this young man had, his money could not buy him a ride in a car or in an airplane. His money could not buy anything we would recognize as surgery or as medical treatment. He could not, for all his resources, turn on a light, buy penicillin, watch TV, hear a pipe organ, listen to the radio, wash dishes in running water, type a letter, mow the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 12, 2018. Parallel passages include: Matthew 19:16-30; Luke 18:18-30.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

² Perennial reprint edition, 1990.

lawn, sleep on an innerspring mattress, or talk on the phone. If he was rich, then what do you think you are?³ So now that we're all on board here, let's look at the text.

This encounter is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels. All three tell us that the man was wealthy. Matthew says he was young. Luke says he was a ruler. And Mark tells us that he ran up to Jesus and knelt before him. So our idea of "the rich young ruler" is actually a composite of all three accounts.

Remember that Jesus and the Twelve were still on the way to the Cross; and as they began this particular day's journey, a man ran up and knelt in front of Jesus. That was unusual; but he was clearly wealthy, which made such an approach remarkable indeed. The man began the conversation rather abruptly: "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

"Good teacher" was an unusual form of address that suggested an equally formal response such as "Most honored and good sir," or something like that. The man's question was awkward, since one usually doesn't "do" anything to receive an inheritance; but of course, he wasn't talking about money as such. His question had to do with "eternal life," or right standing with God.

The idea of inheritance is a familiar one to persons of wealth, since that's usually how wealth passes from one generation to the next. The man's money provided many things, but it had not—and could not—give him a peaceful heart; and it certainly could not purchase righteousness before God. The apparent urgency of his approach suggests that the matter was one that burdened him considerably.

Declining the expected response "from one good man to another," Jesus asked, "*Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.*" Jesus dismissed the man's attempt at parity and enumerated a few of the Ten Commandments—those having to do with relationships with other people.

Jesus' initial response was not a denial of His own goodness. It was both a rebuff to the man's not-so-subtle effort to put himself in the "good" category and an invitation to notice that if Jesus is good, and only God is good, then that shared characteristic points to who Jesus really is.

Perhaps missing that connection, the man responded, "*I have kept all these [commandments] from my youth,*" and this may have been mostly true. After all, before he met Jesus, Paul affirmed that "*regarding righteousness based in the law, [I was] faultless*" (Philippians 3:6). The man clearly thought that he was in good shape with respect to keeping the law of Moses, but his unsettled spirit indicated that he was worried about something in the "fine print" that he might have missed.

Jesus knew what the man's real problem was, of course, just as He knows what your real problem is, and what mine is. That's why Jesus had cited the particular commandments He did, and why He omitted several of them. Now, Jesus was about to confront the man with his real situation and his real need; but before He did, Mark noted that "*Jesus looked at him, and loved him.*"

That is a critically important point. Yes, Jesus knew exactly what was keeping the man from what his heart hungered for, and Jesus knew the man was going to reject the challenge that was coming . . . *and Jesus still loved him.* That's how Jesus is with you and me, too.

³ William Boice in "The Christian Standard," *Leadership*, vol. 4, no. 4.

Contrary to what we may imagine, God is not watching us in order to catch us doing something wrong. No, God's Spirit is continually at work beckoning us to "Come closer! Come in farther! Come up higher!"

It is God's purpose that you and I experience the fullness of God's own Joy, and God's commands to us are all intended to give us access to that Joy (John 15:11). It's important to remember this as we hear what Jesus said next: "*You lack one thing: Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me*" (Mark 10:21).

Oh, my! Our wealthy friend was hoping for something he could do that would quiet the anxiety in his heart, but this price tag was far more than he expected. With this powerful thrust, Jesus cut to the heart of the matter. While the man may have done a fairly good job with the easier commandments, he was flagrantly guilty of having broken the very first one: "*You shall have no other gods before me*" (Exodus 20:3).

The fact of the matter was that our rich young man had fared too well at banquet tables. He had rested too comfortably on the security of his surplus. He had assumed too easily that he could buy everything that he needed.

His wealth provided him with power, significance, and status. It organized his values, his priorities, and his ambitions. And it had, in a very real sense, become his god. Without intending to, perhaps, he had moved from simply being wealthy to being an idolater who worshiped his wealth.

The thrust hit home. The man recoiled, gasped, and turned pale. I've been the recipient of such a thrust, many years ago, and I remember it well. I recoiled and gasped, too. Perhaps you know what I mean.

Upon learning that he could not have both his money *and* eternal life, the young man chose . . . his money. The key point here is not that the rich young ruler was an evil person. He was not; but he was imprisoned and condemned by the very things he trusted to make him free. Jesus still loved him, but Jesus let him walk away. And in the same way, each of us, one by one, has to make the choice to follow Jesus . . . or not.

It's important to note that Jesus did not make this same requirement of every person who wishes to follow Him. Salvation does not come through an empty bank account.⁴ Abraham was wealthy. Job was wealthy. David was wealthy. Zacchaeus was wealthy. Joseph of Arimathea was wealthy. Wealth itself is not the problem.

It was common in those days to regard worldly wealth as a sign of God's favor, and sometimes, it really is. And it was with respect to such a world view that Jesus noted that "*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*"

In that declaration, Jesus compared the largest land animal most people had ever seen with the smallest aperture with which they were familiar. It was hyperbole, and it might have been funny had the topic not been so serious.

The disciples' astonishment and dismay was off the charts at this point. If worldly wealth is a sign of God's favor, and if it is so difficult—indeed, so *impossible*—for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, then what hope is there for the rest of us??!!!

⁴ Indeed, the rabbis limited one's alms to 20% of one's property and possessions so that one would not become penniless and a burden to others.

There are twin dangers to be avoided at this point. On one hand, we should be wary of any attempt to dilute or to reduce the stringency of Jesus' words. We are always in danger of revising Jesus to make Him less upsetting to our normal system of values.

On the other hand, we do well to be aware of our everyday tendency to apply Jesus' hard teachings to other people, and not to ourselves. Somehow, we always seem to place ourselves beneath the "riches danger line."

But here's the deal. A single person living at the current U.S. poverty level of \$12,140 per year is still in the top 14% of wealthy people on planet Earth. Let me say that again: a single person living at the current U.S. poverty level of \$12,140 per year is still in the top 14% of wealthy people on planet Earth.⁵ There are no get-out-of-wealth-free passes here.

And no matter how much or little we manage of the world's goods, we are always in danger of trusting those goods more than we ought. Even we who know in our heads that money does not buy happiness or heaven still wish in our hearts that we had more of it.

My friends, wealth is not wicked in itself . . . but it is *dangerous*. Wealth gives the power to do a great deal of good in the world, good that only wealth can accomplish; but wealth is also dangerously seductive. And worldly wealth is one of our enemy's primary weapons deployed to render us of no use to the Kingdom of God.

Money is "distilled life," and few things reveal our true priorities more than what we do with the money we consider to be our own. We squirm when talk turns to money, because to talk about money is to talk about the deep matters of the heart.

The disciples were astonished and dismayed at Jesus' words, and we may well find ourselves standing with them. It's good if we do, because it's crucial that we understand Jesus' warning and that we hold ourselves to account together with this rich young man.

The question here has to do with our everyday priorities and with our ultimate loyalties. **Jesus did not die on the cross for something the rest of us would find easy.**

Although the warning about wealth is for us all, Jesus was not pronouncing a new requirement that His followers must divest themselves of all worldly goods. The prescription for this particular man was tailored to his particular sin, and Jesus' prescription for you and for me is tailored to our particular sins as well. But it is bracing to remind ourselves that none of our worldly wealth will cross over into eternity.

The danger of wealth is that it creates the illusion of self-sufficiency. Access to ample resources nourishes a sense of personal power and diminishes our reliance on God. Jesus warned over and over about the dangers of wealth, and it is essential for our spiritual well-being that we hold earthly things lightly in our hands and in our hearts.⁶

It is my privilege to walk with many of God's children as they approach the end of their earthly lives, and I notice again and again that once the diagnosis of impending death is made, worldly concerns suddenly fall away. When that moment comes—and *it will come*—none of the things we usually worry about—NONE of them—are going to matter anymore.

Someone has graphically noted that "**All you will have in your cold, dead hand is what you have given away.**" That might be a wise sentence to put on a mirror somewhere.

⁵ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines>; <http://www.globalrichlist.com/>

⁶ See Jesus' disturbing parable in Luke 12:13-21.

To return to the ending verses of our text, Jesus responded to the disciples' astonishment with the encouragement that "*With man [salvation] is impossible, but not with God, because all things are possible with God.*"

That was good news, and it's still Good News, but Peter brushed the assurance aside: "Look, we have left everything and followed you," he asserted. Peter rightly noted that he and the other disciples had already done what Jesus had just told this rich man to do, and he wanted to know "So what's in it for us?" And as He had done with the rich man, Jesus gave Peter more answer than he expected.

*"Truly I tell you," Jesus said, "there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and the sake of the gospel, who will not receive **a hundred times more**, now at this time—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, **with persecutions—and eternal life** in the age to come. But many who are first will be last, and the last first"* (Mark 10:29-31).

Jesus responded to Peter by promising three things: reward on earth; persecution; and eternal life. The reward on earth is membership in the Family of God. It's by virtue of Christian friendship and hospitality the world over that we receive the "hundred times more" of which Jesus spoke.

But as wonderful as that is, those who follow Jesus are frequently persecuted, both then and now, and the Christians in Rome to whom Mark was writing these words understood that quite well. But through it all, over it all, around it all, and under it all, is the promise of Eternal Life. As missionary martyr, Jim Elliott, memorably put it, "**He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.**"

Jesus warned us to remember that "*real life is not measured by how much we own*" (Luke 12:15); or, as an unknown author put it, "Money will buy a bed but not sleep; books but not brains; food but not appetite; finery but not beauty; a house but not a home; medicine but not health; luxuries but not culture; amusements but not happiness; religion but not salvation—and a passport to everywhere but heaven."⁷

Those affirmations are absolutely true; but when all is said and done, today's text is not really about money or material things. **The central message of this text is that we must root out of our lives anything and everything that hinders our following Jesus.**

My friends, this world and this life are good and gracious gifts from God, and we should both delight in them and care for them, with great wonder and with great joy! And as we do, we need to remember that Real Joy only comes as a dividend of putting God's purposes at the center of our lives.

Elsewhere, Jesus told us, "*Don't strive for what you should eat and what you should drink, and don't be anxious. For the Gentile world eagerly seeks all these things, and your Father knows that you need them.*

*"But seek first his kingdom, and these things will be provided for you. **Don't be afraid, little flock, because your Father delights to give you the kingdom.** Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make money-bags for yourselves that won't grow old, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. **For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also**"* (Luke 12:29-34).

Amen, and Amen.

⁷ *Voice in the Wilderness, Leadership*, vol. 5, no. 2.

Because I Have Been Given Much

Because I have been given much, I too must give; because of thy great bounty, Lord, each day I live, I shall divide my gifts from thee with ev'ry brother that I see who has the need of help from me.

Because I have been sheltered, fed, by thy good care, I cannot see another's lack and I not share my glowing fire, my loaf of bread, my roof's safe shelter overhead, that he too may be comforted.

Because love has been lavished so Upon me, Lord, a wealth I know that was not meant for me to hoard, I shall give love to those in need, shall show that love by word and deed: thus shall my thanks be thanks indeed.