

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/10/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, October 10th

Mark 10:17-31

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A matter of first love

This well-known text is used by some to criticize wealth and impose social justice as well as contorted by the wealthy to justify remaining wealthy. Yet this text appears to have an unmistakable message that goes beyond wealth. When questioned by the rich man about eternal life, Jesus tests him by naming only the Commandments that involve human relationships. Jesus did not name any of the vertical Commandments and neither did the rich man in his response. His first love was revealed in the text, and [spoiler alert] it was not God. The man who initially appeared to be richly blessed was revealed to be a victim made poor by the stumbling block of his riches. Whether it be a desire for worldly prosperity or a zeal to build the Kingdom on earth with our own hands, without God being our first love we are destined to end up like the rich man.

Mark 10:17-31 Commentary

This week's text continues from last week with Jesus saying, "... *whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it*" (v.15). Against this backdrop this week's story unfolds.

¹⁷ And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Only later in the text is it revealed the man had great possessions. His appearance would have also revealed his wealth and his youth. Perhaps it was the combination of the man's youth and his zeal to find an answer to his question as to why he ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him. No man of such status would behave this way in public.

¹⁸ And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰ And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth."

Perhaps Jesus senses flattery here? Jesus tests the man. He names six commands, all of which are horizontal in that they govern behavior with fellow humans and how we should love others. Whether significant or not, Jesus relaces Do not covet with Do not defraud. Jesus does not mention any of the four Commandments that deal with how we should love God. The man merely states that he has kept all the Commandments Jesus referenced since his youth.

²¹ And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." ²² Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Jesus' responds out of love and compassion. Jesus understands the man loves his money and his possessions more than God. The man's response revealed that he knew it also. The poor rich man.

²³ And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴ And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how difficult 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 a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

Jesus unpacks what his disciples had just observed with some further teaching. Jesus' question amazed them. Why? In this culture, wealth and good health were thought to be a blessing from God. This man would have already been considered as favored by God. What had he to worry about? Jesus presses home the point with v.25. There is a myth going around that the Eye of the Needle was a specific gate entering Jerusalem where camels laden with goods had to kneel to pass through it or first unload all the goods. Thus, one had to kneel to Christ or unload all one's possessions. A nice story but a myth. Jesus' statement is hyperbole, perhaps even somewhat humorous. The point made here is even those so blessed by God cannot save themselves.

²⁶ And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God."

The disciples are not surprisingly "exceedingly astonished." If such a man so blessed by God could not be saved, then who could? Jesus drives home the point. Man cannot save himself but for God, all things are possible.

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

Peter puts into words what the rest of the disciples were probably thinking. They had left everything behind to follow Jesus (something the rich man was unable to do). What about them? Perhaps some words of encouragement were needed for the disciples in the text and for the disciples in Mark's original audience. Jesus then promises them (and us) both an earthly and eternal reward for following Him and proclaiming the Gospel. Jesus also promises persecutions. The narrative closes with the upside-down view of the Kingdom of God relative to the worldly kingdom. The rich man, considered the first by worldly standards, fails to make it whereas the Kingdom is compared on three prior occasions to children (9:36-37; 42; 10:13-16), the last by worldly standards.

Reflections

Jesus offered the man what he was asking for - eternal life. The man resisted surrendering his wealth, and with it, his social status and influence. This man's wealth came at great cost. Ultimately, this is not about wealth but about love. Who do you identify with in this passage? The disciples needing assurance or the rich man? The cultural mandate requires us to engage the world, but we must not be of the world. The question of who or what is our first love has eternal implications.