

**Sharing the Wealth**  
**Mark 10:17-31, Hebrews 4:12-16**  
**A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
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I may not have mentioned that during my pre-ministry years, one of the more interesting jobs that I had was to assist in selling rare historical documents. Are you a big fan of James Madison? We had official documents bearing his signature. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr? We had a first edition of his book *Why We Can't Wait*, with his signature. And on, and on, hundreds of pieces, with a few major areas of focus, largely American history and the international space race while I was there. Lots of it was priced to sell, just a few thousand for many items, a few more impressive or unique items for 20k, 50k, 100k.

And we had one particularly impressive piece. We had the original edition of the Emancipation Proclamation, signed by President Abraham Lincoln. When that document was newly created, a edition of several dozen special copies was made, with the signature of Lincoln and his vice president on each of them. The majority of these are presumed lost or destroyed. Of those that survive, most of them are in museums. If memory serves, I think 5 were in private collections — and of those 5, for the first time in many years, one was being made available for sale.

My job was to locate people who might be interested in such a thing AND would be likely to have the financial resources to make the purchase.

We priced it at a million and a half dollars. So my job was to locate and communicate with as many people as possible that would have a really strong interest in Lincoln, or the Civil War, or the Emancipation Proclamation, or any of that, who were able to drop a million and a half dollars on something they liked. This was a challenge. For one thing, if to you, 1.5 million dollars is pocket change, not a big deal, then you probably had ways to keep people like me from being able to find you. It's like the best spy in the world — if you know their name, they probably aren't a good spy.

The other thing, the one that really stayed with me long after the job, was that if you have a million dollars in some part of the country, say rural Arkansas, then you probably going to be considered wealthy.

Let's say you have a million dollars in some parts of San Francisco or Manhattan. You can't afford an apartment. What was everyday to some people, was unattainable wealth to others. That really stuck with me — that just about everyone looks rich to someone, depending on your perspective.

Maybe you are, too. Let's leave money completely out of it for a moment. Take anyone from the 1800s and describe to them a supermarket, or having several of them minutes away from home. Or indoor plumbing, hot water showers, flush toilets. Describe to them air conditioning. Describe having all the world's information in your pocket, and having video calls with people on the other side of the world in real time. Describe to them antibiotics, or vaccines. You know what, by the standard of Jesus, I am rich.

We are in Mark's Gospel today, and Jesus is talking with a man who we learn has many possessions. In Matthew he is described as a young, in Luke he is described as a ruler. It seems pretty clear that for our purposes, we are to see him as wealthy, whatever that means to you. And he wants to talk to Jesus, because he wants to know what he needs to do to inherit eternal life. In fact stumbles a bit at first, saying Good Teacher, and Jesus immediately responds by saying Why do you call me Good? Only God is good.

If you want an easy take away, we can start there, and the lesson is if you ever find yourself talking to Jesus and you want something, you should probably skip the flattery and the buttering him up — he is going to see right through it, and he is going to make you feel embarrassed that you thought he would fall for it.

So they get right to it — to inherit eternal life, keep the commandments. In fact, here's a list of some big ones, in case you need it.

And the man replies Teacher, I've already done those things.

Let's stop there and take a step back. Why is this man talking to Jesus? We know that he has many possessions, but by Mark's description, he seems an awful lot like me or you. Very relatable.

We know that he has been following all the rules since he was a child, we know that in following the rules he had been doing all that was asked of him, and we know that he sensed that it wasn't enough. Why do people come to Jesus? Perhaps because they want more out of life, and they sense that you get there through Jesus. We also know that having so many possessions wasn't enough to give peace. Sometimes you think if you had more, it would bring happiness or peace — this man has found that it just isn't so, as many have found in our own time.

The scripture says that Jesus, looking at him, loved him. That seems pretty important to me. I've heard some comment on this scripture that is pretty harsh on this guy — but Jesus peered into his heart, and knew him, and loved him. Jesus told him that he lacked only one thing. And that is to sell all that he has, and to follow Jesus. And he walks away grieving, for he has many possessions, and the implication is that he loves his things more than he has the will to do just one more thing to have eternal life. Once again I remind you — Jesus loved him.

Don't forget that we don't know what happens to this guy — I have had moments in my life where I wasn't up to the challenge the very first time I encountered it, and I'd hate for that to be the sum total of what someone knows of my life. So Don't be too harsh on him, after all, Jesus wasn't. Did he eventually sell his stuff? Or some of it? How much would be enough? That is an important question for us, how much is enough?

I want to recognize that Jesus speaks in hyperbole, all the time. He has said that if you think about sinning, to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand, or throw a millstone around your neck and jump into the sea. I'm pretty sure he was trying to make a point that no one can meet this standard, and I'm pretty sure he's doing the same thing here.

The young man wants to do the thing that will get him into heaven, and Jesus is telling him that there is something else, but that it is beyond him.

Another thing -- the possessions aren't criticized, and neither is the idea of being wealthy. The issue here is that by focusing on those possessions, they get in the way of his relationship with Jesus. They get in the way of his following the commandments of Christ.

There is no condemnation for being rich, which is a good thing for us, because depending on who's asking, I think we all qualify. Come to think of it, I probably could have saved this sermon for stewardship season, coming up in a few weeks. A tithe of 10% is a whole lot less demanding than giving up everything we have.

The scripture we heard from Hebrews speaks to how a person can solve this problem, because Jesus seems to be pretty clearly saying that we can't solve it ourselves. Hebrews 4 says:

*We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.*

It goes on

*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

I read this as the young man asking how to get himself into heaven, and being told you can't do it by yourself, that you need Jesus to help you. That is important! And that is why we study these words, that is why we pray, that Jesus might intercede for us as well. Christ is our great intercessor and Thank God for that, because we are unable to do it under our own strength. Thank you, Jesus!

There is more. Jesus doesn't tell the man that there is nothing you can do on your own. The man is asked to give up his earthly treasures in order to gain "treasure in heaven" and only after this should he come and follow Jesus. That seems significant. To follow Jesus, give up earthly treasure first. Of course, Jesus talks in metaphors all the time. If he doesn't mean it all to be strictly literal, what else might be here for us to understand and learn from? What needs to be given to those who need it?

It gets me thinking about society. I am a straight white man, and our society is built for straight white men. Let's say that these days, straight white men are 90% in charge. What if I intentionally lay down some of that privilege, so that others may have it? 100 years ago, Congress was almost all white men. Today, it is 79% white people. How might things be different if closer to half of those were women?

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2019, 60.4% of Americans identified as white only, excluding those who identified as Hispanic or Latino. But about 79% of Congress is white, according to the Brookings data. What would it mean for 40% of those to be black and brown, to better match society? That's still a majority for people like me — but it would mean being less in charge. Intentionally giving up some of what we have, for the benefit of others. I realize this may seem a departure from analyzing a scripture about a person with a lot of possessions getting into heaven, but it gives us a different way into this challenging teaching. Perhaps we are called to think bigger than just giving away some stuff. If Jesus operates so frequently in hyperbole, maybe we are being challenged to think a little bigger about what we have in abundance, that we can give up a little to benefit others that have been allowed to have little.

What else? This is a scripture that has been used to support the idea of a prosperity Gospel, that God shows God's favor through cash and prizes. I don't think that's how it works. 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.*

Wait, master, what was that last bit? No, the other part? 100 fold of persecutions? That doesn't sound like something I want! I'll take the hundredfold increase in riches and real estate, you can keep your hundredfold increase in persecutions. Following Jesus means things change, and that doesn't mean easier. As one commentator put it, there is no prosperity gospel in the shadow of the cross.

We Christians have struggled since our inception with what is in these verses Carolyn read for us — do we do good works that get us into heaven? Do we just believe quietly, privately in our hearts, and that is what God wants? Us Methodists believe the two are inseparable — you accept Christ in your actions, and your actions mean you accept Christ.

This is a hard passage to preach on, because there are several sermons worth of material in these brief lines, and that's before you get to the scripture from Hebrews. I think both are telling us that we don't get our heavenly reward on our own — that Jesus is the way.

Additionally, I think we are being cautioned against hoarding resources. After all, the man isn't criticized for his possessions, but he is told that they are getting in the way of what is really important. He is told to give the money to the poor, and only then is he to follow Jesus. It seems clear to me that he has decided to follow Jesus in his heart, so that inner change isn't the problem. It is to love Jesus more than possessions, and to do something tangible to help those who need it. I think that the entire Christian tradition challenges us to love Jesus in our heart, but the scripture reminds us that what it means to follow Christ and to be Christlike is not something to be contained in the privacy of your own thoughts.

This encounter reminds us that there are those who are called to have nothing — after all, when Jesus starts talking, Peter notes that all those that follow him have left it all behind to do so. This is a prophetic witness to the rest of us, reminding us of how money and possessions can prevent us from doing what God wants us to do. However, there are other Bible stories that remind us that there are those who are called to have extra to share. (Such as Mary and Martha, who must have been somewhat wealthy, in order to accommodate 13 additional men for dinner and lodging from time to time!) So the idea of those called to have nothing really only works if others have enough to share. If you have a little extra, God can use you.

When we aren't talking about physical things, but access, or privilege, how does all of this work? Might some of us be called to share that with others as well? Remember Queen Esther, who came from nothing, became queen, and used that power to save her people — does this count as sharing what you have with those who need it? I'm going to close with that thought. Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus looks at you, and loves you. Amen.