

Sermon on Mark 10:17-31  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2015  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Oh, brothers and sisters, how we love this text! We “think” that it lets us all off the hook – because this rich man, this “prince” of a fellow, so perfect in every way, so well-versed in scripture, so obedient in following God’s law, received his “come-uppance” for Jesus because he lacked one thing. No, it wasn’t humility (although Jesus could have mentioned that)! It was that he was rich, and he lacked the willingness to give up his wealth, share his abundance with the poor, and follow Jesus. Now, we think this lets us off the hook – because you and I are certainly *not rich!* So we can gang up on this poor, (I mean, rich) man, who walked sadly away, because he was, as scripture says, *very rich!* Whew!

However, with this simple exercise, I am going to show how you and I are not “off the hook” at all – that we are *all* implicated, along with this rich man! Now, how many of you own a cellphone or smart phone? Do you have it with you? Those of us who do own cellphones find ourselves very dependent on them to stay connected with the world around us (even if it causes us to ignore the person sitting right across from us!). In the “old days” before cellphones, we used to depend upon landlines to make phone calls. If you were on the road, you couldn’t receive a phone call, and would have to stop at a gas station to make a call, or wait until you reached your destination. (We didn’t have the problem of distracted driving, however!) When you went fishing, you were alone and disconnected from the world – unless you brought your transistor radio. But now, we bring our cellphones with us on vacation, and even go into the wilderness with them! (Which can be good for personal safety.) I have even caught myself bringing my phone with me out fishing in the canoe at the lake, in case somebody calls me from shore to come in for lunch!

So, here’s my question: you love the Lord, right? You follow the Ten Commandments, right? You give your offerings and tithes to the church, right? And you are so humble that you don’t brag about it, right? Well, there is still one thing that you lack. *Can you give up your cellphone for God?* No, I’m serious! I am going to ask you today to give up your cellphone to the Lord. I am going to start. I will put my cellphone in the offering basket, and give it up. How about you? Who’s with me? Now, make sure you turn it off, first!...What’s wrong, you can’t do it? I didn’t think so! It’s just too hard, isn’t it! So, how about if we just do this symbolically – which means, I’ll give it back to you right after the worship service! 30 minutes without your cell phone! It will be a spiritual exercise in self-discipline. Just come up to the altar to get it back, after the dismissal.

So let's get back to the text. In the Old Testament lesson, the prophet Amos makes it easy when he says, "Seek the Lord and live" and then calls out the rich, who "trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, who build houses of hewn stone and plant pleasant vineyards...you know your transgressions are many...you afflict the righteous and push aside the needy in the gate." It is easy to identify the "rich" in such a passage, for the ways in which they mistreat others. Like Payday lenders, today's loan sharks! Or the 1%, who own much of the nation's wealth.

But the truth is, to most in the ancient world, to have wealth was a sign of God's blessing. Those who were wealthy must be favored by God – they must have done something right, for why else would their lives be so materially blessed? It's kind of like today's *prosperity gospel*, where some Christian preachers teach that if you are faithful, God will bless you – not only spiritually, but also financially! (Like the mega-church pastors who live in mansions and travel in their own private jets – surely God has blessed them, and made them examples for us to aspire to, right?) So being rich was not so suspect as it has been lately among the faithful! Only the rich who did wrong were confronted, mostly by the biblical prophets. (To most people, the rich could do whatever they wanted.)

So it must have been a surprise to the disciples when Jesus challenged the rich man who came up to Jesus and asked, "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" (Now, one of my Luther Seminary professors might have said "You can't do *anything* to earn eternal life – it's a free gift of God's grace, through faith!" But I'm getting ahead of the story!) Jesus asked the man if he had followed all the commandments. Yes, the man had followed every commandment to the letter, all his life. Jesus looked at him with love, 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 and follow me.*" The man was shocked, and sadly turned away, because he had many possessions. Was this good news, or bad news?

The disciples were shocked! (So are we! If someone who was that wealthy came to worship today and asked what he needed to do to be saved, we would probably say "just give your money to the church, and you'll be fine!" Are we that desperate, that we forget our Lutheran theology so easily?) Anyway, they were shocked because it turned their world upside down – that Jesus would let a rich man get away, who had shown by his wealth and his faithfulness to God's Law that he had everything all together! But Jesus said, "*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 astounded, and said, "*Then who can be saved?*" Well, Jesus said, "*for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible!*"

Then Peter said, “*Lord, we have left everything and followed you!*” This was true. They had all dropped their nets, left their homes and families and followed Jesus when he had called them. And here is the key verse: 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, for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age...all these things...with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*”

It is so counter to our human experience. On earth, the last are never first, and the first never come in last. Only in the gospel! Sure, sometimes in sports the underdog wins, or the unexpected wins the war, but this is not the “rule” – it’s the exception! But in the gospel, the only way to receive the treasure of the gospel is to give it up! This is the *opposite* of the prosperity gospel! The key to salvation is to be willing to give up – to share with others – the very gift that you treasure most, as having the most value. Which is, of course, the most difficult to let go of!

So what is it that you lack? Most of us would say “I don’t have enough money,” if another person asked us. Or I’m lacking the home of my dreams, or whatever. Our culture tells us that we don’t have “enough” things, enough material possessions, and so we are encouraged and enticed to buy more stuff! Most of us Christians might say “I don’t have enough faith.” Or “I’m lacking in self-confidence, or enough talent, or the education I need.” Most of us look at ourselves and very easily can name things or abilities or relationships that we are lacking. But that’s not what Jesus is getting after.

The good news – the surprise of the Gospel – that Jesus is laying out for all of us is the PROMISE of new life that God offers you and me if we just take the risk and LET GO of what we are holding on to most tightly in our lives. Like when Jesus said, you will only find your life if you are willing to lose it – meaning, that you will find the true life that God has prepared for you if you let go of the life you are clinging to right now, that doesn’t include God in it. For the truth is, *that which you treasure most, what you give up, will set you free and lead you to life!*

So “that thing you lack” isn’t really a thing, a talent, an attribute or possession or something on which you can place a dollar value. It’s really about the *obstacles* that prevent you from a full expression of faith – the stumbling blocks that sometimes we place ourselves, that keep tripping us up and keep us from that relationship with God that God seeks to have with you and me. Maybe it’s pride, independence or stubbornness – but whatever it is, it keeps you and me thinking that whatever riches, or talents, or attributes come from our own hard work or talent. It prevents us from trusting in *God’s abundance*, or seeing the abundant life that God has in store for us, through faith in God’s promises. Like the rich man in the story, who saw his wealth and his ability to follow God’s Law

as something that came from himself, as an expression of his ability, and not as a gift from God. THAT perception was really what the rich man was unable to give up, because his wealth had become so enmeshed with his own self-perception of who he was. He thought Jesus was asking him to *give up too much*, and didn't realize that Jesus was offering him *everything* he lacked! But he had to let it all go in order to see it!

So, what is it that *you* lack? What prevents *you* from seeing God's abundance in your life? Only you know that – I can't tell you what that is – although, I'm sure, God knows! And God promises to help you find it, if you are able to let go of what you are clinging to, which keeps you from seeing what God is offering! That's the good news – that's the promise that brings you closer to the truth and the new life in God, the more you let go of what prevents you from being a follower, a disciple of Jesus Christ! So how will you discover what to let go of? Perhaps we can help one another, in the community of faith, as you and I listen to one another, and hear our stories – that might help us discover our truth. There are the holy scriptures – for reading the Bible, that book of faith, can help bring you and me insight, just as it has today! Then there is prayer, both public in worship and private in your own home, where you can pray to God and ask God to help you to let go of those things that come between you and trust in God's promises.

So we pray today that we will have the faith to hear Jesus' promise, to let go and act on this faith. And then trust in Jesus' promise, that we will receive a hundredfold now in this age – and in the age to come, *eternal life!* And you may even get your cellphone back! Thanks be to God!

And may the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord! Amen.