

What Must I Do?

Mark 10:17-31

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October 10, 2021

Today's sermon is entitled, "What Must I Do?" The title is taken from the rich man's question to Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

But first let's review: We said last week that Mark was probably the first Gospel written and that it depicts good guys and bad guys, good guys such as Jesus, the disciples, and minor characters, like the children. It also depicts bad guys, like the Pharisees and the disciples, who are both good guys and bad guys. But what about this man who asks a question of Jesus. Is he a good guy or a bad guy? Good question. Let's see.

When I think of this incident, I think of the Heinrich Hoffman painting from 1889. It shows a white Jesus with a resplendent young man. In Matthew the man is said to be young, and in Luke he is said to be a ruler. Mark just calls him a man. A recent movie on the Gospel of Mark is probably truer to the historical background.

Jesus is on a journey--eventually to the cross--, and this man comes up to him, kneels before him and asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus is uncomfortable with being described as good because he wants that reserved for God. And he points to the commandments about murder and adultery and stealing and lying and defrauding and honoring your parents. And the man says that he's kept all these commandments since he was knee high to a grasshopper. Jesus looked at him lovingly and said, "There's only one area in which you've fallen short. Go, sell everything you got, and give 'em to the poor and you'll have riches in heaven, and then come follow me." Jesus invites him to be a disciple, joining those who have left their fishing nets and their tax tables.

The man is shocked. "What-what-what do you mean, Good Teacher?! This is not good advice. Give away everything, all I got?!" And he went away with the long face, with his tail between his legs. He was grieving. Mark tells us why: He had many possessions. In other words, he was rich. It's important to understand first-century economy: there was no middle class. There were a small number of people who were rich, and everybody else was poor. The rich would have been so because they cooperated with the Romans, the occupying power. So, this guy has followed the commandments but doesn't want to follow Jesus because it means selling everything that he owns. Ultimately, then, this guy is one of the bad guys.

Jesus then looks around at his disciples and says that it's hard to enter the kingdom of God, the dominion of God, the God-movement. The kingdom of God is the theme of Jesus' preaching and teaching. It is a frontal assault on the reign of Satan and his minions, such as the demons that possess people and the Romans that possess the land. So, it's hard to enter the God-movement in general, but it's particularly hard for the rich. Jesus even says that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is using picturesque speech here, something he often does. People sometimes talk about "the eye of a needle" being a gate in Jerusalem in Jesus' time, but that gate only dates to medieval times and not back to the time of Jesus. This saying is just as strange as it sounds.

The disciples were astounded: "What are you talking about, boss? The rich getting into the kingdom like a camel going through the eye of a needle. Well, then, who can be saved?" In the Old Testament, there is a certain ambiguity about wealth: at times it is seen as a blessing from God, yet at other times it is seen as something that stands between humanity and God. We have that same ambiguity today: we envy rich people, but at times we are suspicious of them. How did they make their money?

Who are the rich anyway? Those who make \$100K, \$200K? A million dollars a year? But what about global standards, in which we compare our economy to the developing world? US Christians and churches are rich in many ways. A landmark book written by Mennonite theologian Ron Sider was entitled, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. I commend it to your reading.

In response to the disciples' question, "Who can be saved?" Jesus says, "For people, it's impossible; for God all things are possible." Rich people and middle-class people and even poor people can be saved. And that's good news. It's God's call not ours.

Peter is concerned and says, "Hey, Jesus, what about us? We've left everything, and I mean everything--fishing nets, tax tables--and followed you." Jesus says that those who give up possessions and relationships will receive them back in this age and in the age to come eternal life. The disciples, then, are going to get what the rich man wanted: eternal life. Yippee! That's what we want too. Life that is eternally long and eternally deep.

What does it mean to follow Jesus in twenty-first century USA? It is a question of stewardship, and here I'm using a big-tent version of stewardship: What do we do with what God has given us? It refers to everything from what we do with the dollar bills in our wallet to what we do for a living to what we do with planet earth. That's a big tent. Some people take a small-tent version of stewardship. It has to do with money you give to the church. That's important, and the church survives on its contributions from members and attenders, but small-tent stewardship should be put in the context of big-tent stewardship, for stewardship has to do with all of life.

Stewardship also has to do with calling. Jesus called this man to sell everything and follow him. The disciples had already heeded that call. The disciples come off OK here, maybe a little self-serving, but at least they're not harassing the parents of young children like they did earlier in the chapter. But what is God calling you to do with your money, with your life? This is a matter of prayer. Ask God, what would you have me to do with the way I take in and give out money? When you ask that question, be sure to allow God time to answer. Sit in silence. And maybe you'll want to be ready for an answer with pen and paper. And maybe you want to talk with others in the church about how they answer those questions.

Stewardship is a matter of discernment. It involves values. A budget is a moral document. And here I'm talking about individual, family, church, organization, or government budget. A budget is a moral document. And your bank statement is a moral document. Budgets and bank statements say what your values are. There is a good bit of talk about values voters, and usually that refers to far-right voters, but everyone who votes is a values voter. Everyone holds certain values and votes in accordance with them. What are yours? The man in this story

valued his possessions more than following Jesus. How are we going to use our possessions as we follow Jesus in the 21st century?

This story about the rich man and Jesus raises some prickly questions about money, about stewardship, and about values. It raises the questions: What must I do? To what am I called? What do I value?

On the First Church website under Outreach is the famous poem of Teresa of Avila:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world.
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
and yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

I am also reminded of the ending of Mary Oliver's poem "Summer Day":

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

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