

WEALTH

A man ran up and knelt before [Jesus], and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Mark 10:17



The issue at stake in today's gospel reading is not riches but eternal life. This is easy to forget as the narrative proceeds. As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹ Eternal life is something that can be acquired and hence possessed, but what exactly is it? Being alive means living physically with one's heart beating and one's lungs breathing; one's brain is active and one can speak. Even though we know that we must one day die a physical death, *eternal* life means something more. It means living a life of quality in harmony with God. It is close to the Kingdom of God which was promised to the poor in spirit² and was central to the message of Jesus.³ The rabbis spoke of "the kingdom of God that is to come."

Let's study the attitude of the man.⁴ In Luke's account, he was "a certain ruler." In Matthew, he was "a young man."⁵ He knelt before Jesus as a sign of deference. Dennis Nineham in his commentary says that he was "altogether too obsequious and effusive in his approach."⁶ He buttered up Jesus by calling him "good teacher," but "Jesus pricked the bubble of his fulsomeness" saying, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." The way to eternal life was by doing God's will, which for Jews meant obeying the Ten Commandments. But when Jesus listed the commandments the man patted himself on the back and boasted, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth."⁷ One wonders whether he was looking for an answer for his question or fishing for a compliment. Despite all this "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," which included a physical gesture like a hug.

Jesus gave a surprising answer to the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Keep the commandments," he said. I'm interested in other answers that he might have given. "Be a disciple; follow Jesus; go to church; say your prayers; give to the poor; and study the scriptures." I wonder what you would add? The question also entails what inhibits one's life in the Spirit. I think of preoccupations which consume us: ambition of office and jealousy of the successful, anger when we are slighted or humiliated, the desire for recognition.

When I was an undergraduate at Exeter University in the 1960s, the fundamentalist Christian Fellowship invited Fr. Michael Hollings, the Catholic chaplain at Oxford to lead a retreat. During the Q. and A. time, some attacked him for not being sufficiently Bible-centered. Fr. Michael responded by warning them not to be so obsessed with the Bible that they lost their relationship with Jesus. You can be so infatuated with an idea or a practice, a possession or power that you lose touch with reality. That's what happened to the rich young ruler. It blocked his desire for eternal life.

So Jesus exhorted him, "Set yourself free. Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven." No wonder, "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." This interaction is part of a succession of teachings in Mark about a number of things:

¹ Mark 10:17

² In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:3

³ Matthew 4:17, (and John the Baptist, Matthew 3:2), also the parables of Jesus (Matthew 13). Mark's version is "the Kingdom of God" (1:15, 4:11 etc)

⁴ He was male. The Greek, εἷς, is the masculine form of the number, "one"

⁵ Luke 18:18, Matthew 19:20

⁶ Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark* (1963), p. 270

⁷ The list omits duties to God and includes only duties to one's neighbor. In Mark (10:5), an 11th commandment is added, "Do not defraud" and Matthew (19:19) includes the 2nd Great Commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"

Greatness	(9:33-37, Proper 20, September 19)
Divorce	(10:1-9, Proper 22, October 3)
Possessions	(10:23-31, Proper 23, October 10)
Status	(10:42-45, Proper 24, October 17)
Authority	(11:27-33 // Matthew 21:23-27, Proper 21 Year A, October 1 2023)
Accepting an invitation	(Matthew 22:1-14, Proper 23 Year A, October 15 2023)
Taxes	(12:13-17 // Matthew 22:15-22, Proper 24 Year A, October 22 2023)
Resurrection	(12:18-27 // Luke 20:27-40, Proper 27 Year C, November 6 2022)
The first commandment	(12:28-34 // Matthew 23:34-40, Proper 25 Year A October 29 2023)
The Son of David	(12:35-37 // Matthew 22: 41-46, Proper 25 Year A, October 29 2023)
Watchfulness	(13:32-37, Advent 1 Year B)

So, today the teaching is about possessions. Jesus did not say that it was bad to be wealthy, but rather he spoke about the attitude that we bring to our possessions, our possessiveness. As 1 Timothy said, it is *“the love of money [that] is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.”*⁸

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal...No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”⁹ It’s an either/or, rather than a both/and.¹⁰

An in today’s gospel, he said, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” and he also said, “For God all things are possible.” And he added, “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.”¹¹ This is not a prohibition against being rich but about the temptations of riches.

Here’re some examples about how the wealthy misuse and abuse their power. In 1983, the Supreme Court found a loophole to acquit Raymond Dirks who had been found guilty of insider trading by a lower court. This is an example of “white collar paradox”; conservative Supreme Court justices, who rarely vote to reverse convictions of poor criminal defendants, have shown a clear sympathy for rich ones. The conservative Justice, Antonin Scalia, voted for defendants in about 7 percent of non-white-collar criminal cases and 82 percent of white-collar ones. Under the Equal Protection Clause states were required to equalize the spending between rich and poor school districts. In 1973, however, conservatives on the Supreme Court ruled by a 5-4 vote that Texas and other states had the right to spend more money on children in rich districts than children in poor ones. In the 2010 Citizens United case, conservatives on the court struck down campaign finance limits, thus giving power to wealthy people and corporations to control government. Since then Sheldon and Miriam Adelson have donated nearly \$300 million to influence policies which enrich themselves further including lowering the taxes they pay.¹²

Thus wealth becomes one more thing among many that gets in the way of our entering the kingdom of heaven. “How hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God.”¹³

Proper 23, October 10 2021

⁸ 1 Timothy 6:10

⁹ Matthew 6:19 and 6:24. “Mammon” in the KJV, a pejorative term to describe gluttony, excessive materialism, greed, and unjust worldly gain.

¹⁰ Other teachings about the corrosive affect of riches include, the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) and the parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1-12)

¹¹ Mark 10:25, an example of hyperbole, an exaggeration, not intended to be taken literally

¹² See Adam Cohen, “How the Supreme Court Favors the Rich and Powerful,” Time Magazine (March 3, 2020)

¹³ Mark 10:24