

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, March 22, 2009

Face to Face: Slander and Gentleness ***“Receiving the Kingdom”***

Mark 10:13-31

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Mark 10:13-31 consists of three units. Verses 13-16 delineate the reception and blessing of children; verses 17-22 depict the dialogue between Jesus and the rich man; and verses 23-31 describe Jesus’ teaching on the danger of riches. All three units speak to the theme of entry into the kingdom. Children will gladly and without conditions take the opportunity, but those caught up in the ways of the world hesitate.

I will focus my attention on the second of the three units, the story of the rich man. This is one of the most difficult, disturbing and surprising stories in the entire New Testament. You will learn that Jesus is dangerous to our conceptions of what defines a “decent life.”

You recall the story don’t you? A rich and decent man excitedly approached Jesus and asked, “How do I live a decent life? I’m pretty close, so just tell me how to close the deal.” Jesus said essentially, “I love you, but you aren’t even close. So here’s what you need to do: give away all your money, your stock options, your cars, your homes, your status and focus completely on following me. Then you’ll have real life.” The rich man walked away.

I have two difficulties with this text. First, I am rich. Two thirds of the world lives in poverty and one-third in relative wealth. Second, I’d like to think that I am a fairly decent person. If I divided the world into two camps, good people and bad people, most of us would be on the good side. We know the rules: go to church, be nice to people, don’t break the Ten Commandments, give some money away, recycle and volunteer somewhere. We have our problems, addictions and sinful habits, but all in all, we’re decent people, much like the man in this story. How will Jesus respond to the decent life I’m trying to build for myself and my family?

Verse 17 states, “Jesus started on the way,” or literally, “on the road.” The gospel writer Mark uses “on the way” or “on the road” as a code word for discipleship. To believe in Jesus is to join Jesus on the road. As Jesus was on the way, a man ran up to him, fell on his knees, and said, “Good Teacher, what must I do inherit eternal life?” Mark tells us that he was a man of great wealth. In the first century, most people assumed that wealth was the sign of

a decent life. We notice the young man’s enthusiasm and sincerity. He’s eager; he’s an overachiever.

You’d think Jesus would be happy to have an eager and super-achieving disciple. Instead, Jesus was rather abrupt. Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” This has often confused people, because elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus does say that he and God the Father are one. Then Jesus gave the expected answer: “You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.” The rich man replied with total sincerity: “Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

The text states that “Jesus looked at him and loved him.”¹ Isn’t that an amazing statement? The Greek word for “looked at” is an intensified compound of the normal word for look. In other words, Jesus looked intently; he examined his soul. We have to assume it was an uncomfortably long look. And then Jesus spoke. “One thing you lack: Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”² Verse 22 reads, “At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad.”

When I was a student at California State University in Fresno, a friend showed me a picture of a circle. In the center of the circle there was a large throne. Around the edge of the circle, there were different circles representing the activities and priorities in our lives: work, hobbies, school, relationships, sports and music. Whatever sat on the throne, he said, would control the activities around the edge. Then he asked me, “What is on your throne? Either Jesus Christ sits on the throne or you have put something else in that place of priority. It could be work or your family or your marriage or your desire to get married or your hobbies. It could just be you sitting there. But remember: whatever sits on the throne becomes your god and will control the other areas of your life.”

Here is what Jesus asked the rich young man to do: Put me on the throne. Put me first. Right now you have another, lesser god on the throne; money, status and being a decent person. I don’t want a little bit of your money. I don’t want a little more of your time. I don’t want a little more of your religious efforts. I want you; all of you. Put me on the throne and I’ll give you something better; much better.

Our decent, successful and wealthy young man didn’t trust that better life. He refused to join Jesus on the road. Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “How hard it is for the rich [and the decent, I might add] to enter the kingdom of God?” Verse 24 reads, “The disciples were amazed at his words.” So Jesus said it again: “Children, how

¹Mark 10:21

²Ibid.

hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "With man, this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." Jesus was referring to the absolute impossibility of faith. Getting right and staying right with God isn't just hard; it's impossible. You can be rich, decent and successful and that will not score enough points to get right with God. That's impossible. The Bible tells us not just that we have a weak and lethargic faith; it says that we're spiritually dead.³ The Bible tells me that I'm God's enemy and I have to surrender my weapons.⁴

There is only one option for being on the road with Jesus. It is not the Decent Way, but the Disciple's Way. The Decent Way is all about what is proper, respectable and natural. It's the path of lukewarm Christianity; it's neither hot nor cold. It goes through the motions without the influence or power of the Holy Spirit. It's what some people call "cultural Christianity." The Disciple's Way begins when you know that Jesus is looking at you with love. It continues when you hear Jesus say, "I don't want your decent, lukewarm, conventional or safe approach to faith. I want you. I don't want your activity. I want your love.

C. S. Lewis compared the Disciple's Way to going to a dentist. When a tooth is hurting, we go to the dentist. We just want relief from the pain, but the dentist has a different agenda: the dentist wants to set all of our teeth right. In the same way, Lewis said, "Our Lord is like the dentists. Dozens of people go to him to be cured of some one particular sin which they are ashamed of or which is obviously spoiling daily life. Well, he will cure it all right: but he will not stop there. That may be all you asked: but if once you call him in, he will give you the full treatment."⁵

Notice how we get from the Decent Way to the Disciple's Way: the invitation to the Disciple's Way comes when we hit a wall. It comes through a wall called health problems, relationship struggles, loneliness, grief, loss or addiction. It's through a wall that the Holy Spirit speaks to your heart.

Why pursue the Disciple's Way? One word: joy. Let me quote C. S. Lewis again: "Keep nothing back. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin and decay.

³Ephesians 2:1-10

⁴Romans 5:9-11

⁵C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarpersCollins, 1998), 171.

But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in."⁶

As Inside the Kingdom people, we are marked. The gospel marks us. The sacraments mark us. Church discipline marks us. As believers, we are marked. As marked people, we are revealing, resolute, ready, responsive, resilient, reframed, repentant, repetitive, remembrant, receptive, refined and reverent.

Since this is the case, how will you spend the life that God has given you? The least powerful, least wealthy and least influential have a greater prospect of entering the kingdom than do those who are most powerful, wealthy and influential. Is the Kingdom of God behind door #1, #2 or #3?

People cannot enter the kingdom of God by becoming the least powerful, the least wealthy or the least influential. If those are the three options or doors, there is no hope. People cannot enter the kingdom of God without God's regenerating power. Salvation is of God and not of the believer. There is a cost associated with salvation. It costs to follow Jesus. Sacrifice, manifested through obedience, is the fruit of such a salvific face to face encounter with Jesus.

Many who are now first in importance and power will someday be last, while those who lack wealth and standing in society today will someday have it all. Pursue Christ. Pursue the Disciple's Way. Surrender your life to him. Face to face with Jesus. Come closer. Be changed. Let us pray!

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⁶Ibid., 191.

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