

Text: Mark 10:17-27 21st Sunday after Pentecost.

October 18, 2015.

Grace and peace are yours through Jesus in whom are all the riches of God. Amen.

Do you want to be rich? Do you really want to be rich? Do you really, really, want to be rich? Well sure, if I were rich, I would have less stress. If I could pay the bills, life would be easy. You know, if I were rich, I could give more to church. If I were really rich, I wouldn't have to work and then I could help out here more often. Think about it! What about this? If everything on earth belongs to God and he gives it to whom he wants, that must mean that rich people are blessed by God. Doesn't the Bible promise, "I know the plans I have for you. Plans to prosper you"? There it is. That might be what we think. It seems like that's what Jesus' disciples were thinking. Rich people were blessed. Rich people can do more good. Be rich.

Make no mistake. Financial riches are a blessing from God. People who are rich in this world can be generous and do so much good, both physical and spiritual. But the devil is quick to turn that blessing into a curse. Financial riches can so easily become the most important thing in life, even more important than God. Riches can be a snare and a trap that can lead us away from Jesus, from his love and forgiveness and ultimately even from eternal life. Maybe it would be good to rethink the question, "Do you really want to be rich?"

I know you've heard the rest of the story. But can you pretend for a second that you are hearing this for the first time, that you are just meeting this man? He's young. Luke calls him a ruler, probably a leader in the synagogue, like a man on the church council. He was respected by others. He was eager. He comes running up to Jesus, in the broad daylight. He is respectful to Jesus. This guy falls on his knees. He was curious about how to get eternal life. Wouldn't you be happy if your daughter brought this guy home?

Then he opens his mouth and all is not well. Good teacher sounds respectful, but Jesus heard something else, something deeper. What must I do to inherit eternal life? He thought eternal life was obtained by his good work. He thought heaven was a prize he could earn. Even that seemingly respectful address, "Good teacher," was not as good as it sounded.

Jesus heard that. Why do you call me good? No one is good, except God alone. Why does Jesus pounce on this guy for calling Jesus good? Why didn't Jesus praise him for such respect? There are several reasons. One, the rich young man was using the term, "good" cheaply, to apply to just a mere human. Jesus is saying, "Don't use good to just refer to a person." Save good for God. Give him the praise. This leads to the second reason. The man didn't see Jesus as God. If you look closely, Jesus is not saying, "I'm not God. Don't call me good." Jesus is actually saying, "Don't call me good if you think I'm just a man, just another 'good teacher.'" Call me good if you believe and know that I am God. Finally, this man was only looking for rules from a human teacher on how to work his way to heaven. Jesus wanted to show the man God's way to have heaven for free. No way was Jesus going to accept this cheap, empty title, "good teacher."

But, Jesus does give him what he asks for, the commands to keep to have eternal life. The “easy” ones, right? Don’t murder. Really? That’s simple. Don’t commit adultery. No problem there. Still faithful. Don’t steal. No bank robber here buddy. Do not give false testimony? Haven’t ever even been to court. Don’t defraud. Fill out my taxes as honestly as possible. Honor your father and mother. Maybe not always when I was real young, but now I’m good. You see how easily we find ourselves identifying with this young man? While maybe at first we thought he was arrogant, maybe we can kind of see his point. Maybe even find ourselves agreeing with him, “I’ve kept these. Teacher, you must have more than that. That was too easy.”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. And loved him. And loved him. And loved him some more. And kept on loving him. And so did Jesus say, “Hey, buddy, you’re good. You’re eager and respectful and you want to work your way to heaven. You’re a nice guy. You’ve kept the commandments. You’ll be fine.”? No! Jesus loved him. And so Jesus loved him enough to point out what he lacked. He lacked love for God above all things. Go, sell and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Now please understand, Jesus is not laying out some alternate way to heaven. Oh, if I just sell my stuff and give to the poor and follow Jesus, that’s the work I can do to get to heaven. No! Jesus was pointing out, “What’s the real treasure? What do you really want? Do you really want the treasures of heaven, or are you content with the treasures of earth? If you had to choose, which would you choose?”

Without a word, the rich young man said it all. His face fell. Went away sad. His heart was so full of earthly treasures, there was no room for heavenly ones. He left Jesus, but the words of Jesus did not leave him. He thought he had kept all the commandments, but he hadn’t even kept the first one: love God with all your heart. He loved his riches more than God. Let me ask you again, now, “Do you really want to be rich?”

Do you really want to be rich after you hear Jesus say, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God”? Are you amazed along with Jesus’ disciples? Are you even more amazed that Jesus would repeat it so we don’t miss it? It’s hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It’s hard for the rich to get to heaven. Do you still really want to be rich? Why does Jesus tell us this? Because he loves us, just like he loved that man. He addressed his disciples as children, a term of dear and tender affection. Jesus wanted to warn them, that great a blessing as riches can be, they can much more easily be a trap the devil uses to get you to love riches more than you love Jesus.

Yeah, Jesus loved us so much and was so serious about this. He said it in this amazing way. Jesus didn’t just say, “It’s hard for rich people to get to heaven because they are tempted to love their riches more than God.” You might remember that. Probably not like you would remember this, “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” This is just like it sounds. The biggest animal they could think of. The smallest opening. A camel, through the eye of a needle. Think about that! Who wouldn’t be amazed? Who wouldn’t be astonished? A camel through the eye of a needle. Makes you wonder, “Do you really want to be rich?”

What about us? What about you? Do you really want to be rich? If I only had a dollar for every time someone told me, "I can't make it to church. I have to work." But wait, why would I want a dollar? Do I want to be rich? But seriously, look at your schedule. What's first? Look at the money. Where does it go? Would any of us really sell everything if that's what it took to have eternal life? You see, Jesus was showing us, sin is a problem we can't fix with a few better choices. If we think we've kept the commandments, we haven't made it past the first one: love God above all things. We want to ask with the disciples, "Who then can be saved?" Can anyone be saved at all?

With people this is impossible, but not with God! All things are possible with God. Can any person start in heaven and come to earth? That's impossible? But Jesus did. Jesus came to earth. He was more than a good teacher. He was the perfect Son of God. Can any person be perfect? Impossible! But Jesus was perfect. Jesus kept all those commandments since before he was born, especially the first one: love God above all things. And so now the impossible is possible. You are perfect in God's eyes. Not perfect because you have kept all the commandments. But perfect because Jesus kept all those commandments in your place. Impossible for a sinner to be perfect? Not with God. All things are possible with God. Can a sinner take away his own sins? Impossible? What about the sins of the whole world Impossible! But with God all things are possible. Jesus took away our sins of putting earthly riches ahead of God. Jesus removed our sins of thinking our real treasure is here on earth. Jesus took away sin! And if your mind isn't already blown enough with being perfect and having every sin forgiven, what about rising from the dead? Ever seen that? Impossible! But not with God. God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus who was more than a good teacher raised himself from the dead. Yes, the Bible says both. Don't ask me how it's possible, just believe that God the Father and Jesus can both do the impossible, because they are one. Give perfection, give forgiveness, raise from the dead. That means you too will rise. Not impossible. Nothing is impossible with God. So let's go back to the disciples' question of amazement. Who then can be saved? Everyone who has faith in Jesus. Believers in Jesus more than can be saved. Believers in Jesus are saved. For all eternity. Sound impossible? Not for God.

And then let's go back to our opening, theme question. Do you really want to be rich? What about rich in faith? What about rich in love? What about rich in understanding to see that earthly riches are a blessing from God, a blessing we can use to his glory, a blessing that we can see as a gift from God so we focus on the giver, God, and not the gift, riches. That's the kind of rich I want to be. That's the kind of rich God wants us all to be. Amen.