

FIRST LESSON: Ecclesiastes 5: 10-15
SECOND LESSON: Mark 10:17-31
October 10, 2021

“The Money Trap”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

It’s a challenging interaction. A young man runs up to Jesus and falls on his knees. “Good teacher,” he says, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responds by asking why he calls him good if only God is good. And then Jesus reminds him about the commandments—but only *some* of the commandments. Jesus leaves out all of the God directed commandments. Instead, he concentrates on the commandments involving our treatment of one another. “You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.” “Do not defraud” is actually not part of the Ten Commandments. Jesus has apparently substituted it for “You shall not covet.” (Exodus 20:17). This makes a kind of sense because this was a rich man, less likely to covet the possessions of others and more likely in the overall scheme of things to defraud others in order to enrich himself.

The young man declares, “Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy.” We might think he was either bragging or clueless, but apparently he was sincere, because Jesus “looked at him and loved him.” “One thing you lack,” Jesus said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

Yikes! Not exactly the answer he was looking for.

This story is interesting for many reasons, not least of which is the concept of “inheriting” eternal life. We would say something like “get” or “receive,” not “inherit.” What can anyone do to inherit? To inherit we have to be part of the family, or at least a close friend. I suppose it is possible today for a charity to inherit, but this is more personal than that. Inheritance is more about belonging than earning.

This young man happened to be rich. We only learn that later. But he would have understood all the rules of inheritance at the time. The firstborn son inherits two shares of the property, and each of the other sons inherits one share (Deuteronomy 21:17), so the firstborn son gets twice as much as his brothers. If there are no sons, daughters are allowed to receive the inheritance (Numbers 27:8-11). In most cases, a daughter would receive property of some kind when she married, property that would come back to her should the marriage end in divorce. These are the facts of the case, but it still doesn’t answer the question as to how eternal life can be inherited, until we look at how often the concept was used to describe a relationship with God. Beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob God repeatedly promises to give land to the people as an inheritance, and not only land, but a covenantal relationship. It

makes sense then that if God also has something called eternal life, it must be possible to inherit it. Logically it also makes sense that idolatry and other immoral actions can get us disinherited.

Jesus tells the young man that he lacks one thing. He seems to be doing everything right, but if he really wants to step out and trust God fully, he should sell everything he has, give the money to the poor and come and follow him. The young man was dismayed and he walked away. We should not be quick to condemn him, because we might well have done the same thing. Society viewed this young man's wealth as a sign of God's favor. It gave him status in society and in the synagogue. He was "a somebody." Jesus offered him the chance to become a nobody. Selling everything he had and giving the money to the poor would have brought down reams of condemnation on his head. His family would be beside themselves. They would no doubt have called the local rabbi in to talk sense to him. His friends would have tried to talk him out of it. Everyone would have assured him that his prosperity was from God, so who was he to give it away? Even the disciples were shocked by what Jesus said to this young man, because he had never said this to anyone else. As far as we know Peter still had a home and a boat to go back to. Martha, Mary and Lazarus had a nice piece of property outside of Jerusalem. Other disciples owned property. The primary call is to a life of discipleship, not necessarily a life of poverty. But Jesus told this man not just to get rid of his possessions and walk away, but to redistribute his wealth among the poor. He was being called to change his relationship with the poor and to become poor. But the cost was too great for the man to bear. So Jesus responded, "Children, how 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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

There have been many contrived attempts over the years to come up with a rationalization for Jesus' comparison of a rich man being saved to a camel going through the eye of the needle. One story tells us that "the eye of the needle" refers to a low narrow door in the city wall, a door so low that camels could only pass on their knees. Not true. There is no such door. Others have claimed that this refers to a narrow mountain pass, but again, we know of no such mountain pass. Instead, we have to face the fact that Jesus was making an insane statement to get the point across. It's an even more extreme use of hyperbole than when he says to cut off a hand if it makes us sin, because that at least is physically possible. This is not. This is a metaphor. And we have similar if colorful metaphors. We say things like "when pigs fly" and "a snowball's chance in hell."

The disciples were understandably shocked, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

Ecclesiastes reminds us, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income." We can be rich, or not so rich, and still be trapped by money. A Sunday School Teacher once asked her eight eager 10-year-olds if they would be willing to give \$1,000,000 to the missionaries who were coming to visit the church.

"YES!" they all screamed!

"Would you give \$1,000?"

Again they shouted “YES!”

“How about \$100?”

“Oh, YES we would!” they all agreed.

“Would you give just a dollar to the missionaries?” she asked.

The children all exclaimed “YES!” just as before except for Johnnie.

“Johnnie,” the teacher said as she noticed the boy clutching his pocket, “why didn't you say 'YES' this time?”

“Well,” he stammered, “I HAVE a dollar.”

Studies have shown that Americans think they are a lot more generous than they actually are. We all tell ourselves that we're doing enough to support the work of the church and to care for the homeless and the refugee. But we're not. None of us are. Because we are trapped by our money. We are afraid of not having enough. And some of us don't want to give up the security and social status having money brings, because the fact is in our world poor people are looked down upon. This was true in Jesus' day, and it's true now. But there is a tool we can use to free ourselves from the trap of money. It's a simple change of perspective. We can look on our money and possessions as not ours at all. If I am a steward of the money and possessions I am using and they really all belong to God, everything shifts. If I am just managing rather than owning, priorities change. This brings freedom. As a good steward I may make different decisions about what to do with God's money than I would if it were MY money. God's priorities do not involve me indulging in luxury. God doesn't require that I have a bigger house than I need in a ritzy neighborhood because of the status it might give me. God is not the slightest bit interested in my wearing extremely expensive clothes with designer labels, only that I be clothed. God is concerned about people. If it's God's money I will probably prayerfully invest in people, rather than things.

Not everyone is asked to do what this young man was asked to do, but all of us are called to make a full commitment to God. We think we will lose out in this deal, but the fact is we will gain every time. I can't tell you how many times I have faced an apparently insurmountable financial crisis and God has guided my actions and provided. At this point whenever I have an unexpected need I just look heavenward and say, “*Okay, how are you going to do it this time?*” God's economy is a perfect economy, one filled with generosity and grace, and one completely absent of fear.

We all use money. In our society we need money to survive. But money is God's main competitor for our affections. Our money has “In God we trust” printed on it, but often the truth of the matter is “in money we trust.” But money does not love us. Money will not care for us through the ups and downs of life. It has no personal vested interest in our well-being. Of all things to rely upon money is the most fickle. It is here one day and gone the next. God is the one who deserves our whole-hearted worship and devotion, and we cannot worship both God and money. Amen

Ecclesiastes 5: 10-15

¹⁰ Whoever loves money never has enough;

whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income.

This too is meaningless.

11 As goods increase,
so do those who consume them.
And what benefit are they to the owners
except to feast their eyes on them?
12 The sleep of a laborer is sweet,
whether they eat little or much,
but as for the rich, their abundance
permits them no sleep.
13 I have seen a grievous evil under the sun:
wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners,
14 or wealth lost through some misfortune,
so that when they have children
there is nothing left for them to inherit.
15 Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb,
and as everyone comes, so they depart.
They take nothing from their toil
that they can carry in their hands.

Mark 10:17-31

17 As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

18 "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

20 "Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."

21 Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

22 At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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."

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

28 Then Peter spoke up, "We have left everything to follow you!"

29 "Truly I tell you," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

