

## Mark 10 Sermon

You may well have noticed, but as we've started heading towards Easter, there's been a kind of disturbing trend in what Jesus has been saying in Mark. Already twice now he's talked about how he's going to be rejected, betrayed and killed, and then rise again three days later. His teaching now isn't centred around showing us who Jesus is, it's about **how to be Jesus' disciple without Jesus around any more.**

The disciples don't really know what to make of this, and we saw Peter get quite upset about it in chapter 8. But they really need this sort of teaching, and of course we do too because we don't have Jesus around either. So this is a perfect passage for us to learn from about how we can be better disciples, how we can be part of the kingdom of God that Jesus is talking about.

But before I get into the passage itself, this is the question I'd like you to have in your minds as we go along. The big question here is: **"How are you any different?"** Think about that as we dive into our passage at the account of the rich guy, starting at verse 17.

This one guy comes running up to Jesus: he's got a really important issue. He flings himself on the ground and says, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, immediately for us alarm bells may have started to ring. How can you do something to inherit something? That doesn't seem to make sense. But bear in mind that 'inherit' was a word used back then to talk generally about receiving future blessings from God. This guy believes that there is life after death, but he also realises that it can't be taken for granted. He wants to make sure that he's on the right track in his spiritual quest.

So Jesus questions him about how he's going with keeping the commandments. And notice what he focuses on. It's the commandments to do with how you love your neighbour. This guy is obviously rich, so there could be a suspicion that he's obtained his wealth in a bad way. Has he ripped people off, even his parents? Has he been involved in fraud? Has he made up things to get people into trouble so he can make a profit? Has he stolen it? Has he killed for it?

All these things are possible, but the guy says he's done the right thing by everybody. And Jesus is actually impressed: he looks at him, and loves him. This guy really is seeking to get close to God. He's not just there to get a pat on the back. He's looking more and more like a good recruit to have on Team Jesus. So Jesus says that there's just one thing that's letting him down: "All you need to do is sell all your stuff, give the money to the poor."

"I'm sorry, what? Sell all my... and then give it... I don't understand," he might have said. This guy is shocked. He has to leave because he literally can't even deal with the options that Jesus has presented to him. And the disciples were shocked too. This man is godly *and* he's loaded. Wouldn't that be the best combination you can think of? Isn't he precisely the kind of guy you want as part of your group? After all, isn't wealth a sign of God's blessing? You can't just let him walk away!

Well, the key to all this lies in what Jesus has said before, when the little kids were brought to him in verses 13 to 16.

Think about little kids for a second. There's a lot of things that define them, but if there's one thing they're not great at, it's doing things for themselves, like cooking, or cutting their hair, or reaching stuff, or even just getting around. To actually get what they need, they have to rely on Mum or Dad to give it to them.

And that's pretty much what our attempts to enter the kingdom of God by our own efforts look like. We just end up making a mess of things or flailing around helplessly. When it comes to the kingdom of God, all we can do is receive it the way a kid receives things: simply accepting that we can't do it on our own and relying on God to give the kingdom to us. That's what we do to inherit eternal life.

But that's not the way our world works. Our society tells us that we need money to give us security, independence, freedom of choice, certainty, a good life for us and our kids. It promises us self-sufficiency, that we don't need anyone to help us, we don't need to rely on anyone. That it's money that will never let us down, as people are prone to do. Money will give us what we want and what we need now and into the future.

That sort of thinking can even find its way into our spiritual lives too, because we see around us that money can do so much. Think back to our rich guy in Mark. Right now, he's the guy who has stuff. He can make things happen because of his money and all the influence that that can bring. He probably has friends in high places, business contacts, he can fund public buildings, all sorts of things.

"Think of all the good I can do for you, Jesus!" He could say. "Need to feed your disciples, bam, done. Need somewhere to stay? I know some guys. Have some legal troubles? I can cover all the fees. I can do so much good for you, Jesus. I can do so much good because I have all this money and all this stuff. I can make your ministry possible. I can make your ministry happen. Don't you see, Jesus? You need me and my money."

We think these things because our thinking is based on the idea of money and wealth being important. That's the entire foundation for how we go about life and even how we think about God. Like the disciples, we're shocked when we hear Jesus talk about how impossible it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of God. Surely it can't be that way, we cry. We try and minimise what Jesus is saying, like maybe he was talking about this little gate in Jerusalem, which is just a bit hard to get through (even though it was built, like, 900 years after Jesus said these words). Or maybe we're talking a really big needle or a really tiny camel. We point out that Jesus didn't ask everyone he met to sell their stuff and give to the poor.

We don't want to hear what Jesus is saying because we're the ones who have to pay attention. We are the rich. We are the ones for whom it's impossible to enter the kingdom of God. It's not because God can't do it - all things are possible with God - it's that **we stop ourselves from entering in**. We make it impossible. We get bound up in the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things. We buck against God's claim on our lives. We shy away from being dependent on someone rather than independent. We won't change; we can't change. It's too hard to question the importance of money that's so ingrained in us, so we too go away sad.

If we really want to be a part of the kingdom of God, then looking at it from the world's perspective is obviously not going to work. We need to look at our whole lives from God's perspective. As I've already said, this involves being humble before God and acknowledging that we're all the same to him no matter who we are, whether we're rich or poor, important or unimportant. We all equally need of his grace and love. The kingdom of God is a gift, and all we need to do is receive it with thanks.

Following Jesus does not necessarily equal dirt poverty. What it means is not actually caring about money. Not that you have so much money you have no worries (not that that actually happens), but you don't actually care if you have money or not. You don't give it any importance. You don't cling onto it.

The important things are simply this: Jesus and his gospel, and your family of believers. All of us, all around the world are in this together for the sake of Jesus. No matter where you are, you can find brothers and sisters, mothers, children, a community to welcome you and care for you no matter who you are or what you have. This is what Jesus is talking about in verses 29 and 30. And if you're facing persecution, as Jesus says we will as his followers, you know that you have people who are there for you to support you. When I say "support" I don't necessarily mean financially. If you ask someone from a persecuted church how you can help them, their first answer will be, "Pray for us." Their second answer will then usually be, "Pray for us." And their third? "Pray for us." Money can be useful in some circumstances, but God is the only one who has any power to help us.

It's so easy for us just to live like everyone else, to be content to conform to the lie that the world tells us every day that it's money that matters. But that's not what Jesus calls us to. It goes back to my first question I asked: **What makes you any different?** And I'm here echoing what Mark said a few weeks ago. If your coworkers or your friends can't tell the difference, if they can't tell that you're a Christian, then you're doing it wrong. You might try and cover up for it by saying your being financially responsible, or that you're trying to be wise, or that you're doing it for the sake of your family. But wouldn't it be better for you to help your kids become treasures of God rather than richer in worldly goods? Isn't Jesus worth more to you than your comfort?

These are tough questions, but they're worth thinking about. And that's where we should start when we're looking to apply this passage to our lives. How did you feel when you heard this passage today, or when you read it? Did it make you uncomfortable? Defensive? Did you try and minimise it, try and make it sound a little less extreme? Then you know that you're going to have to change. Then you need to bring it to God. Only he can help you out with this. So pray to him to change your heart to be less like everyone else and more like him. In fact, do that now. [Pray here]

It is going to be really difficult to change your thinking. It's like when you get a catchy song in your head: even if you hate it, you end up singing along after a while. Then, just when you think that terrible song is gone, you hear it on the radio or someone else humming it, and it's back. You're back to

square one with the fight against a money mentality (or Taylor Swift). But even if you trip up with trying to maintain a godly way of thinking, just get up and keep going, keep looking to God.

But I think we need something a bit more practical than that. So let me tell you about Anthony Norris Groves. Before he became a missionary in Baghdad, he was a dentist living in England. One day, he and his wife felt convicted to start tithing, giving 10% of their earnings to the church. So they did, and everything was fine. So they decided to give 20%. Still fine. Gradually, they went up to 40%. Groves was still earning the same amount of money at the time, and now things were getting tough. They had to budget really tightly, keep mending their own clothes instead of getting new ones, things like that. But they found that the joy they got in helping others and growing the church far outweighed the trouble that they had. In the end they got up to 50% before they left for the mission field. There they earned nothing but still managed to stay alive and serve God.

So you don't have to start big. In fact, trying to do a massive change in your life all at once means you're more likely to give it up, you know, like New Year's resolutions usually are. Start doing small but regular changes in your life means you're more likely to get a habit of giving, and a habit of not feeling like you need to hold onto your money. If you've been to any management meetings or the like, you may have seen this little acronym to help you set and achieve goals **SMART**. So often we can be like, "I should give more," and it never really happens, but using this sort of template to help you set your giving goals can be really useful.

**S: Specific:** be specific about what you want to do. "I want to help support missionaries," for example, or, "I want to give to the church." Simple as that.

**M: Measurable:** pick a target for what you want to do, something that you can actually measure. For the Groves, it was giving 10%, but you might prefer to put an actual number on it. Rather than, "I want to give more to the church," say, "I want to give X dollars to the church each week."

**A: Achievable:** See how the Groves started off at 10% and then increased as they went on? That's a good way to go. Pick something you know you'll do, and then you can increase as time goes on.

**R: Relevant:** God will put on your heart something worthwhile where you can use your money that's not you, for

example the Onga or scripture in schools.

**T: Time-based:** Rather than, "I want to increase my giving," say, "I want to increase my giving every X weeks." Again this is an amount that you'll revisit as time goes on.

And don't forget to write it down. Writing it down makes it more real and makes you more likely to stick to it. In the end, you should be seeking to pick an amount that you can live on - not what you'd like to live on, or one where you have all the creature comforts, but something where you can put food on your table, a roof over your head, that sort of thing - and anything above that give away. And don't be afraid to start giving. Start cutting those strings that tie you to your wealth! You might even find you can give even more.

The kingdom of God is the most precious inheritance that we could hope to gain, so let's not be sucked in by the empty promises of money. Let's not prevent ourselves from entering into the kingdom because we can't leave our money behind. We are called not to conform to this world but to be different. Our lives have to be focused on something else. Something far more valuable, something of eternal worth. Let's fix our eyes on following Jesus and treasuring those things that he values: his amazing community of believers and the good news of salvation for the world. That is where our heart should lie.