



Roanoke, Virginia

May 5, 2024

## *“Upside Down Kingdom”*

*Mark 10:17-31*

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Our scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Mark. Just before we enter our text, Jesus has just surprised his disciples by welcoming children, blessing them, and saying the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Perhaps a fitting introduction for the coming scene where he not only says the unexpected but calls his disciples “children,” and reminds them that in God’s kingdom, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

Mark 10:17-31. <sup>17</sup> 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?’ <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: “You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.”’ <sup>20</sup>He said to him, ‘Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.’ <sup>21</sup>Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup> Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ <sup>24</sup>And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>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.’ <sup>26</sup>They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be



saved?’ <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ <sup>29</sup>Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

Can you think of a gospel text that better exemplifies the disconnect between Jesus’ teachings and the norms of our world, or even contemporary Christianity, than this one? It starts out pretty benign. A man runs up to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. A dream question for any pastor, “I’m ready. What’s next?” We’d love this man’s eagerness, his curiosity, his willingness.

Jesus refers him to the Old Testament commandments, do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not lie .... And the young man, like many of us, nods affirming, “Yes, I have followed the law.” He is a good man, he obeys the Ten Commandments. These laws make sense, and they are the laws we probably all try to follow, and want our neighbors to follow. They are laws that we, for the most part, expect each other to keep. I trust my neighbors not to steal from me, I can expect my neighbors not to murder, not to lie to me, or to cheat me. So, right now, we are right there with the young man. “No problem, I’ve been doing my best to keep those commandments all my life.”

Mark says that Jesus loved the man, and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Come and follow me. This is a call story. The man has been called to become a disciple and to follow Jesus at all cost. But ... the price is too dear. He can’t do it. He turns away in sorrow. Out of all the call stories in the Gospel of Mark, this is the only one that ends in failure, with the one being called walking away.

In her 2021 reflection on this passage, Debie Thomas quotes Thomas Merton’s famous prayer:

*My Lord God,  
I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
Nor do I really know myself,*



*and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.*

*But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.*

*Therefore will I trust you always  
though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Holding up this gospel story alongside Merton's prayer, Thomas sees the interplay between divine steadiness and human weakness. Between God's love and our fear. Between a "good teacher" who cares enough to show us the truth about ourselves, and a well-meaning human being who can't bear to gaze into the mirror God holds up for him.<sup>i</sup>

She notes that the man in our Gospel story recognizes his need. The man "runs" to Jesus and falls at his feet because he recognizes that something is missing in his life. From the outside, he has it all, yet he is consumed with a longing for something deeper, something more. Spiritual growth begins with this kind of hunger.

Jesus looks at the man and loves him. (We can get this kind of feeling from Merton's prayer.) But this is not the kind of love that leaves us where we are. This isn't "nice" love. This isn't about what makes him/us comfortable, but it is about challenge and change. Precisely because Jesus loves the man so much, he tells him the truth. Not some half-truth nicety, but the whole, hard truth. "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Jesus' love leads. It leads and redirects and corrects and turns us right around. It isn't afraid to offend. Jesus' love shows us what we really are, not to shame or defeat us, but to deliver us. Are we ready for this kind of loving gaze?

The man walks away; Jesus lets go.

Looking back on the scene, we can see some other parallels. This one is notable when we hold alongside healing scenes in the gospel of Mark. The rich young man runs up to Jesus and falls



to his knees, just as countless others in need of healing or freeing from demon possession have done. Suppose this man came to Jesus not because he was pious, but because he was sick, heart sick. He somehow knows that despite how together and #blessed he appears on the outside, he feels like he's still missing something, something important, something vital.

In this case, maybe Jesus sees all that this man has by way of means and all that he does by way of the law has distorted his sense of his true self, of God, and of neighbor. Perhaps Jesus tells him to divest in order that he may really live by faith in God and in solidarity with his neighbor for the first time ever. This would be treasure in heaven.<sup>ii</sup>

If this is true, then Jesus may be looking at us in much the same way – with love – perceiving a deep heart sickness in each of us. Perhaps he's asking something more of us, too, giving us something to do, something to give up, or showing us somewhere to go.

This isn't a story about our salvation, where we all go when it all ends. This is a story not wholly concerned with our eternal destiny, but it is about a God who cares about the life we lead and enjoy here and now, with each other, in God's kingdom breaking through. In this sense, God's gift of salvation can free us to do something – to love one another as Jesus loved, to care for our neighbors, to share good news – to do these things right where God placed us.

“What can I do to inherit eternal life?” What can I do? Jesus says: Nothing. Through God's grace, it is already yours. Go and live like it.

If this good news is true, then we are free to live like it's true. We choose how we live and whom we serve, not in order to try and win God's favor, but in order that we might bask in God's favor.

Of course, that's easier said than done. Deep down, we're too frightened, too selfish, too competitive to truly live the way Jesus calls. Jesus is on “the way,” and we know where that leads – to Jerusalem and to the cross. We're much more comfortable standing *beside* the way.<sup>iii</sup> But this is precisely why Jesus comes and makes these demands, naming whatever idol we've created, asking us to give it up, throw it away, for the sake of our neighbor and ourselves.

What is Jesus asking *you* to do? I have no idea. But he is asking; he is calling.

Jesus says that the kingdom of God does not look like our earthly kingdom. The kingdom of God doesn't look like what we expect. Our power and our wealth here are not power and wealth there.



“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....” Jesus is contrasting the largest animal and the smallest hole that a first century Palestinian Jew would likely think of. The point is that salvation is not attainable by strenuous human effort, trying to squeeze into God’s domain.

Indeed, salvation is the gift of God’s grace. There is nothing any human being can do to gain it for himself or herself. For mortals, it is impossible. For God, nothing is impossible. That is the promise of this passage: What chance do we have? Every chance in the world if we let God do it.

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<sup>i</sup> Debie Thomas, “What Must I Do?” October 3, 2021, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net).

<sup>ii</sup> David Lose, “In the Meantime: Mark 10:17-31,” [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net).

<sup>iii</sup> Matt Skinner, On texts for Oct. 10, 2021 | Ordinary 28 | RCL Year B, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-story-of-the-rich-man-is-a-gift-to-preachers>.

