

## The Wrong Question

Mark 10.17-31

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Please indulge me for a moment with an exercise in creative thinking. Imagine that Jesus is here among us this Sunday morning, preaching the sermon, leading our prayers, and inviting us to the meal. Close your eyes and give it a try. Now, with your eyes closed take it one step further.

Imagine that the presidential motorcade pulls up and out steps Donald Trump. He enters St Marks with full pomp and circumstance, surrounded by body guards, and a throng of press. Worship comes to a halt as the President saunters down the aisle, salutes Jesus, and then asks this question:

*"Between us powerful men, tell me what I must do to purchase real-estate in heaven. I've been told that you know what it takes. I'm a real-estate genius. I own more properties on Earth than anyone ever has and I'm in the process of becoming an outer-space property mogul."*

Keep your eyes closed. Does this exchange strike you as absurd? Sitting here in this church, in this "real-estate" that is behind on its mortgage, whose food pantry regularly floods, whose building has numerous structural problems, and which is generally unsure about its future, might this exchange feel insulting? Sitting in this "real estate," seeking comfort and direction about your own life, your struggles and those of your loved ones, could this question even feel offensive?

This hypothetical scenario between Jesus and the president is absurd. If it were true, then the president's question would also be insulting and offensive. We can clearly see that, right? Why then do we find the rich man's question for Jesus reasonable?

Let me offer you another scenario. One that is a wee bit more plausible. Again close your eyes.

Jesus is at a gathering on the South Side. A crowd of people are surrounding him. They are angry and scared because the last grocery store in the neighborhood will soon be removed. There is talk about putting in a different store – one that is part of an environmentally consciousness chain. But the people who live on the South Side cannot afford to shop at this store and this chain of stores does not carry the foods they eat. Without inexpensive, reliable transportation, the South Side residents will soon be shopping for groceries at Walgreens and Kwik Trip. This is a serious situation.

As Jesus is leading this community conversation a lime green, VW bug, blasting Christian music out of its sun roof pulls up. Conversation stops as people watch me exit my vehicle, walk up to Jesus, and kneel down before him. The crowd is silent as they listen to me ask Jesus, my beloved Savior, about “inheriting eternal life” and then enumerating my credentials as one of his most devout followers. I show up unscheduled, interrupting this essential conversation about food security so I can obtain assurance about my after-life. Unlike us here at St Marks, who would murmur under our breath at the president’s remarks, this group of people vocalize their disgust. There is no doubt they find my presence and my question absurd, insulting and offensive. (You can open eyes.)

These hypothetical scenarios I’ve just described are modern versions of today’s Gospel story. Jesus is, as always, surrounded by a crowd of needy, emotional people. A rich man appears, likely in a way which exposes his wealth; interrupts the teaching and healing that Jesus is conducting; approaches Jesus with empty flattery; asks a situationally irrelevant and classist question (he’s asking about inheritance while surrounded by landless, homeless, hungry people); and then declares himself worthy of an inheritance based on a faulty self-image. The rich man arrogantly asserts that his request is legitimate because he has earned it – he has followed the law perfectly – an achievement which, mind you, which has only been attributed to Moses, Aaron and Abraham.

Why is it we can find the absurdity in the hypothetical scenarios and yet this story doesn't come across as absurd, insulting or offensive? I believe the answer is because **most** of us read and interpret scripture from the perspective of the rich man, from the perspective of economic privilege. And for those of us who do not have wealth, we have been taught to read it this way. Like the rich man, most of our daily needs are met allowing us the luxury of planning ahead. The people with whom Jesus lived did not have this luxury – they were concerned with making it through that day. A friend of mine, while working on her PhD in Zimbabwe, asked a group of women why they were not concerned about the environmental future of Africa. The women's response was poignant: "How can we be concerned about the future when our children's bellies are empty today?"

Jesus' entire ministry took place within the context of poverty. He was a homeless, preacher, teacher and healer who spent his days and nights in community with people whose children's bellies were empty. Jesus chose a life of poverty not to glorify poverty but to live in true solidarity with the poor, to expose the violence of poverty, and as an act of protest against "the people and systems that oppress the poor and compromise their God-given dignity."<sup>1</sup> In order to truly understand Jesus and what it means to be his follower, we must embrace **his** perspective which is the perspective of poverty.

As North American Lutherans, an economically privileged denomination, it is **as** impossible for us to truly understand Jesus, the leader of the poor, as it was for the rich man to understand the absurdity and offensiveness of his question. As impossible as a camel passing through the eye of a needle.

And yet Jesus says, through God nothing is impossible. The rich man asks Jesus the wrong question and Jesus responds with love. Rather than admonishing the man for his misguided question, Jesus simply answers the question he wants the man to ask. Rather than telling the man why he shouldn't be worried about helping himself, Jesus provides the man instructions for helping others.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/gustavo-gutierrez-and-preferential-option-poor>

Step 1: Eliminate your role in the problem. “Go home,” Jesus tells him, “and sell everything you own.”

The rich man was a land owner. Scripture says he owned many lands. Landowners in ancient Palestine constituted the “most politically powerful social stratum.”<sup>2</sup> Most landowners, especially those with significant land holdings, acquired their land through a combination of inheritance and legally, though ethically, abhorrent practices. When families were in severe financial crisis they would, much like today, sell their property. The sale of land often involved signing contracts which ensured families would never be able to repurchase their ancestral lands. These contracts allowed families to continue farming the land but at a hefty price. They were required to pay rent, which was typically half of their crop, as well as pay the property taxes which were typically a quarter or more of the crop. After they paid all their dues, there was not enough produce left to feed their family and generate a profit. As a result families often lessened their financial hardship by selling their children into slavery either to the landowner from whom they rented or to another. As far as Jesus is concerned, there is no way you can truly help when you are profiting off a system which necessitates the exploitation and oppression of others.

Step 2: Take all of the money received through the sale of your property and give it to the poor. Though the man has been acting within the law, he has been violating the spirit of the law by “defrauding the poor” for his own economic advantage. Distributing the profits to the poor is first an act of restitution – a way of owning one’s wrongs and then seeking to make things right. Giving all of one’s belongings and wealth away is also the beginning of voluntary poverty, which as the lifestyle elected by Jesus.

In her book *Blessed Are the Consumers*, theologian Sally McFague writes, “Voluntary poverty is probably the most powerful wake-up experience possible, for it has the ability (to reveal to us our own) privilege and power in a way few other things would... It provides the opening, the chink in the wall, the tiny peephole in our well-guarded “separate self” (and) once that fortress is breached, we are open to other

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<sup>2</sup> “Binding the Strong Man – A Political Reading for Mark’s Story of Jesus,” Ched Myers. Orbis Books: New York, 1988.

ways of interpreting the world in contrast to the conventional one.” Voluntary poverty allows us to gain a new perspective – to see life for what it really is.

Step 3: “Come and follow Jesus.” Jesus declared the man prepared to be his follower after he walked away from everything. Just as to be wealthy necessitates the exploitation of the poor, to be a follower of Jesus necessitates living in relationships of equality with the poor. The Jesus community, the earthly Kingdom of God, does not glorify fierce independence but cultivates deep human connections. The Jesus community is not dictated or “constrained by rules of status, power, privilege, or prestige.”<sup>3</sup> The Jesus community exposes these rules as cruel lies and reveals the truth about wealth and poverty which they seek to mask. “The opposite of poverty isn’t property, it is community.”<sup>4</sup> It is only after the man walks away from the status, power, privilege and prestige he once took as normal that he is ready to receive his inheritance: a life in relationship with God found in authentic relationship with God’s most vulnerable people.

A break exists between Step 2 and Step 3 where Jesus addresses the man’s question about the after-life. It is almost an aside – a sort of nonplussed, factual response. “Treasure awaits you in heaven.” “Now come on and follow me.” Jesus’ response suggests that it’s a given – it’s not something we even need to concern ourselves with. Interestingly, we often interpret this text with a “then” before the words about heaven. As in, after you do steps 1 and 2, “then” you’ll be rewarded with treasure in heaven.” But the “then” does not exist in the text, it is a word we put into Jesus’ mouth. It is a condition and a limit we apply to God’s generosity. I’m only speculating here, but I suspect this condition is a consequence of our perspective. A deeply entrenched middle-class, fiercely independent perspective which villainizes those dependent upon social generosity (think about the ways we speak about “entitlements” and people who

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting On the Gospel: Mark.*

<sup>4</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, quoted in *Feasting On the Gospel.*

depend upon them) and valorizes those who reject generosity (those who refused help and suffered alone until they made it or died trying). Just speculating. I invite you to go home and ponder this.

What I am absolutely sure about, however, is that the unconditional love of God as expressed in the cross is a given. We have no need to worry about the after-life. Our abundantly generous God has already taken care of that for us, for all of us. And to spend our time focused on securing our place in the heavenly kingdom is not only absurd but to do it at the expense of the earthly kingdom, to waste our inheritance, is insulting and offensive.

The cross is our freedom to not worry about our future.

The cross is our freedom to be fully present in the here and now.

The cross is our invitation to enter into the earthly kingdom community.

The cross and all that it offers is our inheritance.

Do not waste your inheritance. That would be just as absurd as today's lesson.

**Amen.**