



Connecting for Social Justice II

Matthew 19:16-30

Rev. Thomas G. James

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Over the past six weeks, we have taken a close look at what it means to live out our mission statement, which claims, *We believe God is love, so we're making a place for everyone to know that love.* If you have missed any of the recent weeks, you're invited to visit the website at wsumc.com and read, watch, or listen to catch up. For us to be faithful to our call as a church, it's helpful to have all who are participating know who we are, for what we stand, and how we seek to live out our call as a community of faith.

In synopsis, our mission statement is built upon three core values. First, we are a *Welcoming and Nurturing Community*, which calls us to more intentional care for one another by establishing a more nurturing faith community, and to greater inclusiveness and deeper connection with our broken and suffering world. Second, we offer *Creative and Engaging Discipleship*, which calls us into deeper relationship with God through prayer, worship, spirituality, and lived faith. Finally, we are *Connecting for Social Justice*, which calls us to intentional, ongoing missional outreach that demands bold, new ways of sharing God's love, and to recognize our current financial resources as a gift of God that should be creatively utilized in an atmosphere of sacrificial risk-taking for the Kingdom of God.

This last point will be our focus today. What does it mean to recognize our current financial resources as a gift of God that should be creatively utilized in an atmosphere of sacrificial risk-taking for the Kingdom of God?

A few years back I was attending a conference up at Wesley Theological Seminary. The plenary speaker was discussing financial giving in the church, and was questioning if the congregation could articulate their priorities when it came to financial allocation. He wondered if our primary concerns were centered around our housing, our families, our churches, our community, our entertainment, our comfort, or our retirement. He then paused and said we shouldn't have to think hard. He offered that he had been in a conversation with a Bishop in the Methodist Church a few years earlier who named that this was one of the easiest questions to answer. The Bishop simply said, "show me your check book, and I'll tell you what your top priorities are."

For those who don't know what a checkbook is, or who haven't written a check in years, you can insert into the Bishop's quote, "show me your venmo or credit card statement," and you'll understand his point.

The Bishop's sentiment and this plenary leader's point are focused on our financial spending. Without question, there are other aspects of our lives that can be used to identify and draw attention to our priorities. But without hesitation, it's clear that our use of financial resources is

indicative of what matters most to us. It should come as no shock why the saying “follow the money” has been a popular phrase and regularly used since it’s big-screen debut in *All The President’s Men*: it’s true. Recent news has demonstrated this once again – the money trail doesn’t lie.

Jesus has some strong things to say about our financial wealth. Perhaps today’s story, whether read from the gospel account found in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, is the most unquestionable.

In the gospel account, a man comes to Jesus asking, “What good deeds must I do to inherit eternal life?” As we read Jesus’ response, it’s clear the man is asking the wrong question. Jesus has made clear many times prior, it’s not *our* good deeds that offer eternal life, it’s our faith in God. Jesus once again reiterates this point, saying, “There is only one *who* is good.” Not one thing, but the *One*, God.

Yet, Jesus knows our mortal longings for concrete answers, so he continues, “If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” To a Jewish man, who is likely well read in the Torah, this answer should have been more than sufficient. Yet, the man is not satisfied. He doesn’t want a vague response, he wants details. Like when your spouse asks, “did you finish what I asked you to do earlier?” ... “What did you ask me to do?” ... details ... the man asks, “Which commands?”

Jesus obliges, responding with half of the 10 Commandments, “don’t murder; don’t commit adultery; don’t steal; don’t bear false witness; honor your mother and father.” He then adds on a final command, which he has used previously in summing up the Decalogue, “and love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s interesting to me that in his response, Jesus doesn’t say anything about this man needing to be in right relationship with God. There’s no reiteration of “have no God’s before the one true God,” and there’s no offered form of, “love the Lord your God.” Jesus is given the opportunity to lay out for this man a detailed understanding of what he must do to have true life, and in response, every answer Jesus gives has to do with the man’s relationship with the people around him. Perhaps Jesus knew the man already loved God, but didn’t think he truly loved his neighbor, and so he focused on the man’s relationship with others. As we considered last week, dating back to the earliest days of God’s covenant with Israel, there has always been a call to not only love God, but to love the stranger – to love the other.

The man hears Jesus and responds, perhaps with a rising level of pride, “I have done all these things, what do I still lack?”

Jesus finishes this back and forth with a very difficult demand, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.” The man is less than enthused. The text says he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

As Jesus speaks here, his answer seems to reiterate again points he has previously made. He refers back to Matthew 5:48, where he stipulates, “Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect.” As we have discussed before, the language of the interpreted text fails to really capture what Jesus is saying. The Greek word for *perfect* is *telios*. This does not equate to our normative 21st Century, Americanized understanding of *perfect*, like answering every question right on a test. Jesus is not saying one must have ‘unswerving obedience to the law.’ Instead, the Greek *telios* signifies one is made complete. It has to do ‘with being aimed at the proper end or goal.’ To be perfect, as Jesus is defining the term, means having undivided motives from the motives of God; to be perfect as Jesus defines perfect, is to be seeking the shalom (the peace, the perfection, and the wholeness) of all persons – for that is the goal of God.

Jesus’s final response to this man makes clear, the man does not fully keep the commandments he claims to have so faithfully obeyed, for he has not fully aligned his life with the will and desire of God.

As the man leaves, Jesus turns his attention to the disciples. As is his standard practice, Jesus will now explain in greater detail to those closest to him the interaction that has just taken place. Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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.”

This is a challenging text. Admittedly, I’ve studied this text quite a bit. I’ve seen hypothesized reasons why Jesus’ intended response isn’t necessarily as harsh as it sounds. Some claim the problem is clerical, that it’s just a typo. In Greek, the word for camel is *kamelos*, and the word for rope is *kamilos*. There is but a one letter difference, and saying rope instead of camel would have a significantly different impact (one can put a rope through a needle’s eye much easier than a camel). Others have claimed that there was a gate in the Jerusalem wall called the “Eye of the Needle,” that a camel could fit through if stripped of all its baggage. It would be hard, it takes some work, but it would be possible. Yet, further research questions if such a gate ever existed. Many scholars say there is no proof of such a gate. And still, some claim this is a contextually focused claim that Jesus is making, and that he was only speaking about this one man, or even, perhaps, just to the disciples.

One can search all they want to exempt themselves from Jesus’ teaching. Yet, “when these machinations are seen for what they are,” simple attempts to exclude ourselves from the guilt of such a teaching, “we are left with a text that ‘cannot be tamed.’”ⁱ Jesus doesn’t sugar coat the call to be in right relationship with one another, nor to trust fully in God for life. Jesus seems clear in his teaching, the more we secure and store up around us that provides some measure of material comfort, the harder it will be for us to stop looking for our security in such material goods, and trust God instead.ⁱⁱ

The disciples, hearing Jesus’ private response, are astonished at Jesus’ teaching. Perhaps they ask the question many of us hold in our own minds, “Who then can be saved?”

Please understand I know the challenge of hearing this text, as much as I know the difficulty of preaching it. A quick Google search will tell you that three or four of the wealthiest ten counties in our nation are located in Northern Virginia: Arlington, Fairfax, and Loudon, with some reports posting Falls Church up there too. And while the City of Alexandria doesn't make the top ten list, Old Town, the full of 22314, would be at the top were it its own municipality. If Jesus is speaking to a man of great wealth in this text, he is most certainly speaking to many of us, to our neighbors, and to our local community.

Perhaps we can echo the question of the disciples – “Can we then be saved? ... Who can be saved?”

Jesus speaks to us, just as he spoke to them, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Jesus makes it very clear, here and in other places, those who try to save themselves will find they are incapable. It matters not how tall and filled up your store houses may be, they don't convey past the pearly gates. “Those who want to find life,” Jesus says, “must lose it.” Truly, such trust in God is difficult, but it is that “radical trust that enables us to share with others and depend on God's grace alone.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Too often when we think of Jesus' invitation to give up everything to have life, we envision a far off and distant *eternal* life scenario. But read Jesus' words closely. His words in verse 17 offer, “If you wish to enter into *life*.” There is no adjective describing an eternal state; there is no future indication. Jesus seems to be saying, if you want to have true life NOW – here, and today – these are the things you must do. “Those who want to find life,” in the here and now, “must lose it.”

This is the call to social justice. It's about making *life* possible in the here and now. This idea of social justice is very much centered around and built upon our understanding of the love that God has designed for all people as they are today – not as they may be when they die. The focus of God's justice is not simply some eschatological hope (a dream for the future), it's a promise for today. As we defined last week, “Social justice is the creation of social conditions which provide every person with the opportunity of fulfilling the potential of one's personhood and to share in the necessary ‘good things’ of God's creation. To accomplish this, social justice seeks to eliminate social injustice, all those social evils that threaten the welfare and destiny of God's creatures.”^{iv}

Our connecting for social justice means we have to do the radical things that line up with the heart of God, with the purpose of making God's love known, so that *everyone* may know God's love. And folks, this is going to take some sacrificial and radical work. Do you know this weekend marks the one-year anniversary of the unimaginable scene in Charlottesville, where many people gathered – some using God's word as their weapon – claiming that if you aren't white, you don't belong in this nation. There is another rally taking place today, just 7 miles north of here, where people will assert the same hatred-filled claims. The work of God, to let

people know they are of God, that they are loved by God, that they are welcome and wanted – it's necessary work, even today.

We said last week that this work of *Making a place for everyone to know the love of God* will largely take place outside of this building. If it's only happening in here, we're failing. While we will diligently continue to offer a space here at the church for all to know God's love, the mission of *making* a place does not stop when we leave on Sundays after worship. Our utilizing the resources available from this community has at its primary goal this end: to create in our community and our world a place where all may know the kind of love that is exemplified by God in Jesus Christ on the cross. This kind of love gives of one's life what one has to offer so that others may also have life. It means those who *have* wealth, homes, food, and clothing must give sacrificially of what they have so that those who have no food, no homes, no clothing, and no wealth, may still experience God's desire for true life. It means those who live abundantly must take risks to invest in others so that those who do not have, may find life in the sharing of such great love.

In *Connecting for Social Justice*, we must recognize our current financial resources as a gift of God that should be creatively utilized in an atmosphere of sacrificial risk-taking for the Kingdom of God. This not only aligns us with God's love, it leads us toward our call to make a place for everyone to know God's love.

For the glory of the Lord, may we be faithful disciples, who connect with one another, that God's justice may be lived here and now, that all may know true life, founded in the love of the Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

ⁱⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved August 8, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lose.

^{iv} Frank Bateman Stanger. *Holiness and Social Justice*. asburyseminary.edu. Retrieved August 1, 2018.