



Sell All You Have

Mark 10:17-27

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A few weeks ago, we talked about whether the Church could be salvaged in such a way that it could be, as it was first created to be, the Body of Christ in the world – a living witness to God’s true love and will in the world. I said that, at least according to my perspective, this could only happen if we – the Church – submitted ourselves to the reality that we have failed to know God’s will, and that we have interpreted the Word of God in ways that make *us* comfortable and prosperous. Reclaiming our call as the Church will only be possible by better understanding God’s love as it is laid out in the Biblical witness.

As your pastor, I’m committed to the work of correcting the places and ways in which we have gotten it wrong. And I’m grateful that you are willing to engage in this work with me. It is a privilege to serve a congregation who is committed to the (often hard) work of naming where our congregational past – and the present witness of the Church – are not aligned with God’s will for justice, peace, and equity in the world.

To really dive deep into this work invites us to look more intentionally at the Biblical text, including a look at the often-uncomfortable teachings found in the Holy Word. It is easy to pick and choose which texts we want to read and apply, and which texts we want to ignore when they cut a little too close to our personal situation. It’s also really easy to interpret texts in ways that affirm our situation, while ignoring the possibility that the text might be critical of our personal approach to discipleship. But to really know God’s will, we have to look at it all – the words of comfort and the words of challenge. We have to acknowledge both the invitation to “be still and know,” and the call to “go forth to all nations.”

In the midst of studying any challenging text, it is important to remember that the Gospel is good news. No matter how hard it may be to embrace the teachings of the Bible, the witness of God in the scripture still points to the good news of God in and for creation. So, as we study the text, you are invited to hear both the challenge and the invitation – the call for change and the promise of grace.

Over the next six weeks, we’ll be looking at some of the more challenging texts of the New Testament, as we consider some of the more difficult things Jesus had to say. I’ll be utilizing this book by Jewish Scholar Amy-Jill Levine, “The Difficult Words of Jesus.” Along with pulling from her scholarship in worship on Sundays, we’ll also be offering a couple of small group conversations to go deeper into the text. I invite you to take a look at the digital bulletin and sign-up – whether in-person or online – as we spend additional time going further into the text. Whether you share in the small group or not, I also invite you to pick up a copy of the book for yourself, so that you might read more of Levine’s in-depth study – much of which will not make it into Sunday’s messages.

As we look at this morning's scripture, Amy-Jill Levine begins by inviting us to consider what we really know about the character in the text. The text begins by saying, "As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him ..." We don't know much about him at this time, just that he has such an urgent need that he falls on the ground before Jesus, physically insisting that Jesus acknowledge him and respond to his concern.

For the moment, don't assume anything the text hasn't told us. What the story has presented so far is simply a man who seems to have a very real concern about life after death. What could cause someone to have this kind of urgency around inheriting eternal life?

As a pastor, it is not uncommon to be called bedside as someone is preparing for death. It is a common fear when one is facing the certainty of death to question, "have I done what I needed to share in the joy of eternal life when I depart?" I've been asked more than once, "do you think I've been good (or faithful) enough?" It is certainly possible this man is facing a similar dilemma, but again, the text doesn't really tell us why he has such urgency in the question, just that the question exists.

The man, kneeling before Jesus, asks, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

As Jesus responds, he quotes from the Ten Commandments, but he doesn't quote them all. In this location, Jesus pulls just from the second half of the Decalogue.

About 20 years ago, I was working as a youth pastor while attending college. The church had invited a wandering evangelist to come in to preach for a revival. The evangelist, a rather sizable man from Texas, wearing his cowboy boots and Stetson, came and met with the youth during our evening gathering. The first thing he did was pull out a \$100 bill and offered it to the youth, saying, "If any of you can name all 10 Commandments, I'll give you this \$100 bill."

Only one of the youth was willing to try – and they successfully named 7 of the 10. But, try as they might, they couldn't come up with the other three. The \$100 was lost. Even when the evangelist extended the invitation to the rest of the youth group – they could only come up with one more. As a collective whole, the group couldn't name all 10 of the great Ten Commandments.

Jesus was raised in a different era of Biblical literacy.

As a teacher, steeped in the Jewish faith, raised in a Jewish household, Jesus has likely recited the 10 Commandments more times than all of us put together, even if combining our collective in-person and online experiences. Jesus knew the Decalogue – backward and forward – he knew it verbatim.

And yet, as well as he knew it, in this moment, what Jesus offered was, "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."

There are two major changes. If we don't know the 10 Commandments, we may miss the changes all together, and look right past their significance.

The first is that Jesus has changed, “You shall not covet,” to “You shall not defraud.” What was a commandment to not desire or want a neighbor’s belongings – what was a command about one’s attitude or intention – has here been changed into a statement about one’s action. Amy-Jill Levine goes into further detail about the verb *defraud*, highlighting the many times it is used in the Biblical text. She offers, “From Torah to Prophets to Wisdom literature, defrauding is connected with the rich who exploit the labor of the poor.”ⁱ

There’s intentionality in Jesus’ alteration of the wording. But again, at the time, we aren’t really clued in to the fact that this man has hordes of money. The reason for Jesus’ change in wording may not be clear until we understand more about the wealth the man holds.

The second change Jesus makes in naming the commandments is to reorder them – Jesus moves “Honor your father and mother” to the end. This shift also seems intentional and important. Again, Amy-Jill Levine offers that in Jewish law, parents were instructed to teach their children the laws of the faith. These laws included sharing one’s wealth with the poor and needy in the land. “To honor his parents, this would-be disciple should be known for his good works, especially his care for the poor, and not for his wealth.”ⁱⁱ

After Jesus finishes naming these commands, saying that to inherit eternal life the man must have done all these things, the man responds (perhaps with a bit of pride and self-affirmation), “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

Now, this may come off as judgmental on my part, but really? You’ve kept all of these commands ever since your youth? Really? ... I mean, I know some of you think I’m some saint, being a pastor and all, but let’s just clear the air – I haven’t kept all of these commands since I was a youth ... I’m not even sure I’ve kept them all since the start of last week. This man is either a *true* saint or a delusional sinner.

What happens next is an overlooked blessing in the text. “Jesus, looking at him, loved him and spoke ...”

Jesus looked at him and loved him. This is the only time in Mark’s Gospel that we’re told Jesus “loved” someone. Jesus sees the man for who he is, offering compassion and honest care even amidst the man’s prideful belief that he is a perfect saint. But Jesus’ love for the man doesn’t negate that the man has real work to do. And so Jesus says, “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.”

“When the man heard this, he was shocked, and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Jesus goes on to clarify with the rest of the disciples just how hard it will be for a person of wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, Levine says to understand this text, we have to decide what we think about the wealth of this man. How wealthy is he? How did he get his wealth?

What we often do with this text is try to wiggle our way out of Jesus's criticism against the wealthy by saying we are unlike this man. This story is found in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Luke's gospel, the man is called a ruler; he's someone with power. In Matthew's gospel, this man is called young – as if he didn't yet have a socially responsible position, but had somehow inherited a large estate from his parents. He hasn't earned his wealth, it's just been given to him. If we have wealth, but no power like that of a ruler, we claim an exemption from this story applying to our lives. Similarly, if our wealth has been earned by hard work, we say we are nothing like this man. And yet, Jesus' criticism following the man's departure is not about power nor age – it's about wealth.

We might say that Jesus isn't criticizing the man's wealth directly, but that he's criticizing that this man with great wealth didn't have any treasure in heaven. Can't a wealthy person have both? We also try to work our way around Jesus' remark regarding the camel and the eye of the needle. I've preached on this myself. Beginning in the 9th century, it was suggested that the eye of the needle was referring to an evening gate in the walls of Jerusalem that a camel could be pulled through at night. Amy-Jill Levine, along with other scholars, say this is just not true. Levine says any such assumption is no more than an attempt to domesticate the text. Jesus here is not trying to make an appeasing statement that would make the wealthy feel less guilty.

And, while many Christian theologians over time have tried to maintain that the problem lies with one's attitude toward wealth, not the wealth itself, Scholar William C. Placher notes that Jesus doesn't say anything about the man's love of wealth. As he is talking with the disciples after the man leaves, Jesus simply states that it will be hard for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven.

With such a stark a critique of the wealthy, this becomes one of the hardest texts to preach on in a City like Alexandria. The household income in Old Town is well over double the national average. Along with the greater DMV region, we one of the 10 wealthiest metropolitan areas in the US – even when broken down by per capita income.

So how does a preacher preach – and how does a disciple discern – the *good news* of such a text in a community where a majority of our neighbors look a lot like the wealthy man, who when inquiring about receiving eternal life, was told to sell all of his possessions?

Having a broader understanding of the Biblical text helps here.

Jesus's instruction to this one would-be disciple is different than what he says to anyone else. In fact, Jesus is known to dine in people's homes – yet, he never instructs anyone else to sell their house. “Sell all you have' cannot be an address for everyone, and Jesus does not tell everyone to engage in this type of divesting.”ⁱⁱⁱ But we just can't write off Jesus' critique. Again, as Amy-Jill Levine offers, “Riches are a major block to the Kingdom. Unequal income distribution, with the rich getting richer and the numbers of the poor increasingly growing globally, is a major reason the world lacks peace.”^{iv}

And this seems to bring us back to Jesus's focus on the Ten Commandments with this wealth man. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus often refers back to the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures to frame faithfulness. Whether it's the Ten Commandments, or the two summary commandments (to love God

and love one's neighbor found in Deuteronomy), Jesus often refers back to the Torah as the guide for faithful living. The Torah, with its many instructions and laws, was the basis for Jewish community. As Levine offers, "One cannot obey Torah on one's own, since Torah is necessarily relational: to love the neighbor and to love the stranger require actual neighbors and strangers."^v If Jesus is the great unifier, the incarnate one who brings us all together in the love of God, wealth is one of the greatest oppositions.

While Jesus is the great unifier, wealth tends to be the great isolator. As many become wealthier, they move in to larger homes that reside on larger properties, a growing number of which have security gates and high-tech security systems. High-wealth neighborhoods often have gated entry that prohibits access to neighborhood streets. In this way, wealth pulls people away from the community, as they seek larger and more private personal spaces. Those with wealth also have a tendency to become less trusting of others, assuming that friends and family just want access to their stockpiled resources.

Wealth also – from a cultural and societal perspective – provides prestige and honor. We deem those with great wealth as "better-than," regardless how they use such wealth. Yet, as Rev. Dr. Raquel Lettsome offers, "The wealth that can grant one prominence and put one ahead of line according to society's standards is not what does so in the kingdom of God."^{vi}

This seems to be Jesus' critique of the wealthy man in today's text – it's that his priorities have become focused on his own well-being. He's built up for himself possessions and riches for his own earthly well-being, and is now working to secure his own future well-being. He's got what he needs to live securely on earth, and finally he's starting to think about his eternal life too. But Jesus says, your possessions mean nothing if you haven't taken care of those around you. So sell what you have, and give it all away.

And this invitation, this word of instruction, it offers good news – to both the wealthy and the not-so-wealthy alike. It may not sound like good news to those being asked to sell their fortunes, but consider what Jesus is offering.

First, Jesus is saying, you are good enough as God has created you. Your wealth, your fortune, your stockpiled accounts – they cannot earn you God's love. You don't have to be on the Forbes wealthiest list, nor anywhere near it. God loved you long before you ever had wealth. You are worthy even without bloated bank accounts.

Second, Jesus is offering, even without great wealth, you already have what you need to inherit the joy of eternal life. No amount of purchasing, investing, or accumulation will help you find the peace and joy that is offered by God in Christ.

Third, we were not meant to live this life alone. We were created by a Triune God to live in the presence of community. There is great joy found in the corporate life – not the corporate life, as in the business life – the corporate life, as in the life of the community. Even if society encourages otherwise, we do not have to walk this walk alone – we have each other.

And finally, for those who do have great wealth, your wealth can have a purpose – as the man in today’s text is invited, your wealth can make a difference in the world around you. You can share in God’s work by participating in the reconciliation of the brokenness of humanity, offering love and care to those who do not have enough, and working against the societal systems that continue to give power and voice to the few who have great wealth.

Christ invites the man, and all who hear this text, to consider how we might be faithful in our discipleship, offering the promise that no amount of wealth will earn us our way into God’s favor. But that even if we were to sell everything, to have nothing, we would still be loved, be worthy, and be welcomed a child of the Risen Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine. *The Difficult Words of Jesus*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Raquell Lettsome. “Commentary on Mark 10:17-21.” <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved September 7, 2022.