

P21B 2024 Mark 10:17-31

Next month I'm going to Arizona, and ever since I booked my flight, the airline has been sending me promotional emails once or twice a day. On Tuesday I woke up to one of those messages advertising \$70 getaway tickets, which they discount when the plane is already full enough to be profitable but still has more empty seats than they think they'll fill at full price. But that wasn't the only message I got Tuesday morning; I also had a text from my friend Lisa in Minnesota saying that her husband had been deployed with his National Guard unit. He's a chaplain in the Air Force Reserves and was going with a search and rescue team preparing for Hurricane Milton, which at that point was about two days from making landfall in Florida. Then I started to see news of people struggling to evacuate, not only bumper to bumper traffic on the highways but gas shortages and sudden price increases for gas, hotels, and airlines, including plane tickets that were ten and even twenty times the price of those getaway tickets they had been trying to sell me that morning. There are laws against price gouging during emergencies, but it's a sad commentary on human nature that we need those laws—and that some folks are apparently willing to risk the consequences of breaking them to make more money. Someone said that the people exploiting Floridians as they were trying to escape a deadly hurricane should end up in hell; I thought, if people are taking advantage of hurricane victims, aren't we already there?

Some Christians are absolutely confident of Jesus' position on all sorts of modern issues, which coincidentally is always the same as their position on those issues, but which, because they are *modern* issues, are not clearly addressed in scripture. However, Jesus does have a lot to say about the accumulation of wealth and possessions; we just don't like to talk about that too much because what he says doesn't fit our cultural values. We like our stuff, at least until we have to move it, and generally, we think that working towards financial security is a good thing. And this is one of those areas where we can admit that our contemporary context is worlds away from the ancient near east. Jesus never had to pay a car loan or home owners insurance, college tuition or medical bills following surgery or a trip to the ER. Opting out of participation in the economy is not realistic, but that's also not what Jesus is really saying here.

Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? That's a weird question when you consider that you don't *do* anything to inherit; you inherit because you're a child or the next of kin of the deceased, and we don't have any control over whose family we belong to. But that's not the part that Jesus challenges: *Don't call me good; only God is good.* That's not to say that Jesus isn't good or that Jesus isn't God, but if the man wants Jesus to tell him something new or better or easier or different than what God has always said was the way of godly living, he's going to be disappointed. Jesus says, *You know the commandments*, which the man says he has kept all his life. Now, that sounds strange to us because our theology says all people sin and fall short of the glory of God, but that's a Christian understanding, and neither Jesus nor the man were Christian.

Judaism has a higher anthropology, putting more faith in humanity and viewing the law not as a mirror to show us how sinful we are but as an invitation into relationship with God. So Jesus doesn't disagree with the man; in fact, Jesus loves him. But Jesus tells him there is still something that he lacks and instructs him to go sell everything he has, give the money to the poor, and come back to follow him. The man goes away shocked and grieving, for he had many possessions.

We don't hear any more about the man, so we don't know what he decides to do. It seems he could be grieving the loss of what Jesus has promised because he can't bring himself to sell all of his possessions. But it could also be that he is going off to follow Jesus' directions, to sell all his stuff and give to the poor, and that his grief is over the loss of all those possessions. Either way, Jesus acknowledges how difficult it is for him or others with wealth to enter the kingdom of God—harder than a camel going through the eye of a needle, that is to say, impossible. This confuses Jesus' disciples who believed the popular wisdom that wealth and possessions were signs of God's favor: if you were healthy and wealthy, it must mean God was blessing you for your righteousness. If the rich people, who have the most signs of God's blessing, can't get in, what hope is there for anyone else? But Jesus tells them this is God's work, not human work.

Let's go back for a minute to the man with many possessions; Jesus says he lacked one thing...which I imagine the man expected he'd be able to do or to buy. Yet what he seemed to lack was the understanding that he was part of a community. The man was trying to figure out how to get eternal life like it was one more possession for himself while he remained oblivious to those around him who were struggling in this life. He wasn't paying attention to anyone else while he was amassing his wealth and possessions. I wonder if his grief was at finally realizing that he had accumulated his many possessions by exploiting the poor, or at least that he had cared more about stuff than about people—that the love of possessions owned him, not the other way around.

When Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, he's not generally talking about life after death but about making the human community we're living in now more closely reflect the will and way of God. Society tells us that a man's house is his castle—that each of us should be staking our claim and ruling over our own domain. But if we're going to live in the kingdom of God, we're not supposed to be the king—Jesus is; we're supposed to be the subjects. And subjects shouldn't lord it over others or hoard treasure when others are struggling; we're freed to, as our Thrivent t-shirts tell us, *live generously*, because we're all subjects of a good and trustworthy king. Jesus is a king who put himself last and served others and gave everything he had out of love for us; so following him means giving to others, even if, to do that, we possess a little less ourselves. That is a pretty high ideal, especially in our modern consumer world where we have so much stuff we build storage spaces to make room for more stuff. But the kingdom of God looks less like storing up provisions for ourselves and more like setting a table for our hungry neighbors. May God help us be better subjects of that kingdom, here and now.