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## Sermon Summary #29

### Treasure in Heaven and the Deceitfulness of Riches Mark 10:13-31

Stop and think for a moment about the **sort of people** Jesus has encountered up to this point in Mark's gospel. You talk about an odd collection of characters!

There was the demonized man in the synagogue, screaming at the top of his lungs (Mark 1)  
There was the man covered with leprosy (Mark 1)  
There was a paralytic whose friends lowered him through the roof to Jesus (Mark 2)  
There was Matthew, the despised tax collector  
There were so-called "sinners," most likely prostitutes and other social outcasts (Mark 2)  
There was the man with the withered hand (Mark 3)  
There was the naked man indwelt by a legion of demons who was kept in chains and lived in a cave (Mark 5)  
Then there was the woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years, the Syrophenician, Gentile woman who persisted in her request that her daughter be healed, the young boy indwelt by a demon who threw him to the ground and into the fire, and then of course the ever-present religious leaders in all their hypocrisy and high-minded legalism . . .

**Isn't it about time for Jesus to meet an ordinary person;** just a plain, average, decently dressed, educated, common man; someone who won't embarrass the disciples or accuse Jesus of blasphemy; someone who isn't horribly disfigured or disabled; you know, **just a regular sort of guy** . . . Isn't it about time?

**Well, here he is!** Finally, in Mark 10 we meet up with the man known to history as the "rich, young, ruler."

Although our story begins in v. 17, we will never fully understand or appreciate what Jesus says to this young man until we see it in relation to what Jesus has just said in **vv. 13-16**. In all three versions of our Lord's encounter with the rich young ruler, in Matthew, Luke, and here in Mark, each of them is preceded by the brief account of how **Jesus blessed the little children**. Why? What's the point? Is it mere coincidence? I don't think so.

**Clearly Jesus sees in the characteristics of a child something that is essential for all who profess to come to him.** To what is Jesus pointing when he uses the qualities or characteristics of a child? Utter dependency? Wholly trusting? A sense of helplessness and need? One who receives without any attempt to earn?

In a sense, Jesus is saying that one enters the Kingdom of God in the same way an infant enters the world: naked, helpless, and with no claim or sense of entitlement.

Here's the key: **No sooner does our Lord conclude his observations on the necessity of entering the kingdom in the way a child would than there appears before him a man determined on making his way into the kingdom in an altogether different and contrasting manner.**

Immediately following our Lord's declaration that one must **receive the kingdom as a gift**, much as a child would, a man comes to him determined on **earning the kingdom as a reward** for his efforts.

On the surface it appeared that if anyone could truly earn or work his way into the kingdom, this young man could: wealthy, successful, well-spoken, highly placed and positioned in society, clean cut, youthful, energetic, etc. He had evidently heard about Jesus, perhaps he had even heard him speak or watched him minister. You can almost hear him say to himself: "Eternal life! Wow! I've got just about everything else this life can offer. Perhaps I should check into what it takes to obtain life in the age to come."

I doubt if it ever occurred to this young man that obtaining eternal life and the forgiveness of sins was on an entirely different plane, an altogether different matter, on utterly different terms from the way in which he

obtained everything else in life. **Everything else he ever wanted he worked hard to get.** He purchased it. Everything, after all, has its price. Why should eternal life be any different? Whatever he may have lacked that might be necessary to get eternal life, he could surely work to attain. Needless to say, he's in for quite a surprise!

Note his question: "What must I **DO** to inherit eternal life?" In Matthew 19:16 he says, "What **good deed** must I do to inherit eternal life?" Clearly he believed some righteous or religious act, perhaps some sacrifice in the pursuit of social justice, some pious work would secure for him the eternal life he desired.

**But Jesus has just made it crystal clear: You can't enter the kingdom unless you become like a little child and receive it as a gift, not work for it as a reward.**

Why didn't Jesus come right out and say to him what he only moments before had said to his disciples in v. 15? . . . READ. Or why not respond with the words of v. 27? . . . READ. Why the roundabout interaction of vv. 18-22? Why not respond the way Paul did to the Philippian jailer in **Acts 16:31** – "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved?" **The reason for how Jesus responded to this man is found in vv. 18-22 . . .**

The young man had come to Jesus in a humble and deferential way, calling him "Good Teacher," a title that Jesus immediately challenges (v. 18). People have often misunderstood what Jesus is saying here. He is not making a personal confession of sin, as if he is saying, "Hey, fella, it isn't right for you to call me 'good.' If you only knew my private life and all my personal failures, you'd realize that I don't qualify for that adjective!"

No. I think what Jesus is doing right from the start is **exposing this man's superficial concept of what "goodness" really is.** He wants him to reexamine how he defines the term. The young ruler obviously believed that a person could do good things, perhaps by obeying the commands of the OT law, and on that basis be granted entrance into the kingdom. He no doubt considered himself to be "good" and evidently thought similarly of Jesus. So Jesus challenges him right up front:

"Why do you call me good? Is it out of mere courtesy, or flattery, or what? Do you have any idea what you're saying when you use that term? You obviously think it possible for a mere human being to be rightfully called 'good' based on whether or not he or she does good things. But don't you realize that ultimately **God alone is good**? Therefore, don't call me 'good' unless you are prepared to call me 'God!'"

The fact that he is ready to call a man 'good' whom he does not believe to be God is a reflection of how misguided he is about what ultimate goodness really is. Can you see, then, why Jesus responds to him as he does? **Whatever reason this man had for coming to Jesus, guilt for falling short of the demands of a good God wasn't among them! That is what Jesus is trying to get him to understand.**

So, Jesus has inserted the surgical knife into his heart. Now he will begin to painfully turn it and expose the cancer in this man's soul. Here Jesus quotes in order the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and then returns to the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment of the 10 Commandments that constituted the heart of the OT Mosaic Law.

Is Jesus teaching salvation by works? No. **Jesus directs his attention to the Law hoping that it will do its job of exposing him to his moral failures and his desperate need for grace and mercy. This man had little or no grasp of his having offended an infinitely good and holy God. He had a superficial view of the Law, perhaps not unlike the Pharisees of the day. Thus, the 10 Commandments are the answer to this man's question, not because by keeping them he can gain eternal life, but because if he honestly looks at how poorly he has kept them, at how far his heart is from the true intent of the law, he will be confronted with his own spiritual bankruptcy and fall on his face to receive the kingdom as a gift, just like a little child.**

Jesus uses the Law to awaken in him his utter helplessness, his powerlessness, his "good-less-ness"! Thus, he had approached Jesus believing that eternal life is to be gained on the basis of doing, so Jesus addresses him on that level hoping to **expose his self-delusion.**

"Oh, come on, Jesus. Are you kidding me? I've been doing all those things faithfully ever since I was a kid." "Oh," our Lord replies. "OK, let's see if that's really true. Let's see if your so-called 'obedience' to the Law is

anything more than skin deep.”

Jesus *“loved”* him (v. 21). This is not condescending or mere feelings of pity. The heart of our Lord is moved with deep affection and he wants this man to see the truth! The fact that Jesus is said to have loved him indicates he was not a hypocrite, or even arrogant in his response. Naïve and uninformed and unreflective, yes, but not pompous and self-righteous.

Consider our view of “love” today: don’t offend anyone; don’t be insensitive by challenging their false beliefs; avoid painful topics; don’t say or do anything that might be upsetting; be tolerant! Jesus, on the other hand, **precisely because he loves** this young man and cares deeply about his eternal destiny, uses the Law as a surgical knife and cuts deeply into his soul to expose his most fundamental and debilitating problem: covetousness and greed! **See vv. 21-22 . . .**

So what’s up with this guy? On the surface, you want to say: “What a **perfect recruit** for the kingdom! Sign him up! Jesus, this is just the sort of guy you want on your side.” Outwardly he appears to have it all together. He’s young, respectful, sincere, serious and not in the least flippant or casual about the important matters of life; he’s wealthy, influential, intelligent, moral, civil, and probably not at all unpleasant to be around. But in a brilliant use of the law and with a probing, painful command, our Lord uncovers the problem: **he loved his stuff more than he loved Jesus.**

**Does Jesus ask this of all his disciples?** Are we to universalize this command? Does he really expect *everyone* who follows him to sell *everything* they have and give it to the poor? No. We know that many of those who were among his closest disciples were wealthy and retained their property. Peter kept his house in Capernaum, his fishing boat and business; Lazarus, Mary, and Martha retained their property in Bethany. Jesus and his disciples were actually supported financially by others.

So why does he use this approach and make this demand of this one young man? Because Jesus, knowing the hearts of all men, **knew that the young man’s problem wasn’t with adultery or murder or theft. He knew this man didn’t dishonor his parents. He knew that his most basic and hidden struggle was covetousness and greed. See Mt. 6:19-21, 24.**

This particular command, therefore, was a **test** specifically designed for this one young man to reveal and bring to the surface and lure out into the light the fact that his desire for eternal life was at best half-hearted; **he wanted eternal life, but only if he could continue to serve money alongside of Jesus.** Jesus was looking for a **concrete expression** of a truly broken and repentant heart. His reluctance to obey revealed that his outward display of interest in Jesus was not borne of genuine sorrow for sin and a desire to enthrone him as Lord of all.

***This young man suddenly realized that he couldn’t follow Jesus as Lord of his life, because he already had a lord in his life: his wealth! Mark 4:18-19 . . . !***

It’s instructive to **contrast our Lord in his encounter with the young man with the tactics of many so-called evangelists today.** . . . Instead of “Stand up and come forward,” Jesus is more inclined to say, “Sit down, and count the cost!” See Mark 8:34-37.

Being the excellent teacher that he is, Jesus immediately turns to his disciples to drive home the point (vv. 23-25). This was quite a shock to these disciples of the first century. “Most Jews expected the rich to inherit eternal life, not because their wealth could buy their way in, but because their wealth testified to the blessing of the Lord on their lives” (DAC, 425).

**Deceitfulness of riches:** (1) They lull the human heart into thinking that since all things are going well physically and financially, all things must be well spiritually. (2) They deceive us into thinking that eternal life is just like everything else we’ve ever wanted: **available for the right price**, and since we have always been able to buy everything else we needed, why should heaven be any different? (3) We mistakenly think that if God was good enough to enable us to amass earthly wealth, it is because he loves us in a way he doesn’t love others who are less well off. Surely, then, our souls are safe.

**So just how hard is it for the wealthy to be saved? See v. 23 . . .** The camel was the largest animal in Palestine and the eye of a sewing needle the smallest hole. Thus we have here a proverbial saying for the

**absolutely, humanly impossible.** You are undoubtedly familiar with the popular interpretation that the “eye of the needle” is a reference to a smaller door that sits within the larger gate that brings entrance into a city. The idea is that you and your camel can enter in without it being required that the larger gate be opened. It’s difficult, but you can do it. Just have the camel get on its knees, hunch down, remove all luggage it may have been carrying, and push really hard.

The problem is that this interpretation was invented in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, a thousand years after Mark wrote his gospel. Worse still is the fact that there isn’t the slightest evidence whatsoever that this smaller gate was ever called “the eye of the needle.” Even worse is the fact that this explanation destroys the point Jesus is making. **Jesus isn’t saying it is difficult and unpleasant and demanding for a rich person to enter the kingdom. He is saying it is humanly impossible!**

The disciples are now more bewildered than ever! “My goodness. If that is true of the wealthy, what chance does anyone have to be saved?” **None! . . . if it were left solely to the human heart and the will of man. It requires a miracle of divine power and grace! God must intervene sovereignly and graciously to do what the human heart refuses to do and therefore cannot do.**

What Jesus is saying here is precisely what he meant in **John 6:44** – “No one can come to me [there is the impossibility] unless the Father who sent me draws him [there is the ‘all things are possible with God].”

**How will you respond to this human impossibility?** . . . Pause and reflect on **the most stubborn, obnoxious and life-long unbeliever you know.** . . . **Stop and reflect on the most humanly impossible thing you face:** illness, financial roadblocks, rebellious and ungrateful child, and rejoice in the knowledge that with God all things are possible. I didn’t say they are probable, because I can’t control or predict the will of God. What I can say is what James said in James 4:2 – “You do not have, because you do not ask.

Some have taken **Peter’s response in v. 28** as an expression of resentment or perhaps even self-pity: “Hey, Lord, have you forgotten us? You loved that guy and he walked away, unwilling to sacrifice anything for your sake. But we’re still here. We gave it all up to follow you. Don’t we deserve a little recognition or pat on the back?” I think this is being a bit hard on Peter. There’s no indication that Jesus took it that way. Instead, he reminds Peter that no one who has truly forsaken everything will ever live to regret it.

This is **not a commendation or approval of poverty for its own sake.** Jesus is not saying that you should renounce family relationships for no reason. Nor is he suggesting that everyone who follows him will necessarily suffer ruptures in all such family ties. He’s talking about what you willingly embrace as the inevitable result of following Jesus. Follow me, says Jesus, and it will likely cost you the security of your possessions and the favor of your family and those you thought were your friends.

But don’t think you have suffered any ultimate or meaningful loss. **The fact is, if you are deprived of your earthly family in the service of Christ, it will be made up a hundredfold in your spiritual family, the church.** But even if you labor for years without being surrounded by hundreds of sisters and brothers and mothers and children in the faith, you still have Christ!

Finally, **of whom is Jesus speaking in v. 31?** It must be that the “**first**” in this life are the rich young rulers of the earth, those who regard themselves ahead of others in the race, on top of the world, capable of conquering any enemy and overcoming any obstacle and purchasing any product. Those who appear to be “**last**” in this life, but who will be first in the next, are the ones who receive the kingdom like a child: humble, self-sacrificing, repentant believers who know they can’t “do” anything to inherit the kingdom. They can only receive it as a gift of divine grace.