

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Mark 10:17-31, Stewardship 2025

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

As we begin our 2025 Stewardship season in the Gospel of Mark, “a man” approaches Jesus. Identified as “a certain ruler” in the Gospel of Luke;² as “young” in the Gospel of Matthew;³ and as “rich” in all three; the stranger asks Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”⁴ Jesus replies, “You know the commandments: You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery...” the list continues, but the man interrupts Jesus’ catalogue, blurting, “[But] teacher I have kept all these since my youth.”⁵

And then the Evangelist announces the most important message of the lesson: “Jesus, looking at [the man], loved him.”⁶ If you take away from this sermon only one Word, let it be this one: God sees you; God knows you; and holding the whole of who you are, God loves you.

So, Jesus, seeing this person – their haste and their hopes, their sincerity and their sin – Jesus loves them enough to tell the truth: *Friend, if you keep all the commandments and still have not received eternal life, then you lack only one thing ... the one thing that is, everything.*

During these last weeks of our journey through Mark, Jesus has used hyperbole to lift a conversation from the corporeal to the cosmic. Here, Jesus does not speak in exaggerations, and he does not aim for a metaphysical mark. In this lesson, Jesus says *exactly* what he means and addresses personally and precisely what this man must do to receive the gift God has readied: “go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”⁷

The man goes away grieving “for he had many possessions,⁸ and as Jesus watches him leave, the living Christ turns back to his friends and announces, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”⁹

Jesus’ claim “greatly astounds” and confuses the disciples because they believe wealth witnesses God’s favor; they understand wealth to *follow* God’s blessing and, therefore, this new teaching that not even the wealthy can easily enter the Kingdom must spell a far worse fate for them who have so little, who have not yet been so blessed.¹⁰

Thankfully for us readers, Mark has already provided the key to understanding Jesus’ pronouncement regarding the rich: *Jesus, looking at the man, loved him.*

See, Jesus' does not deliver judgment, but expresses lament. While the desperation of those experiencing poverty might point toward God as a resource, the wealthy can fund alternatives. To press this point, Jesus reiterates his claim with a metaphor: "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."¹¹ Again: why is it that difficult for the rich to enter God's kingdom? Because we can afford other options – enticing, convincing distractions. We who have advantages can afford to choose the world's treasures, rather than heaven's ... and so we do.¹² God does not withhold anything from us; rather, we ignore what God offers.

Given the Stewardship pressures we apply to this story, we tend to emphasize the first three verbs of Jesus' response to the stranger: *go* and *sell* and [conveniently for our fundraising] *give*. However, Jesus' commission does not universalize; Jesus carries out the salvation of the world with a challenge of *this* man and *his* priorities, *specifically*. Counterintuitively, the commandments have misled the stranger from faith's highest aspirations. Yet, while those three verbs urge his release, his letting go of worldly task lists, we Hungry-Hungry Hippo the to-do's – gobble up the actions as new directives for *us* to follow. And going, and selling, and giving – just as dutifully as this stranger had kept the law – *we risk his very same mistakes*.

We also prefer to generalize the objects following those verbs: *what you own*; *the money*; and *the poor*. As with his declaration about the wealthy, Jesus does not condemn either ownership or money on their own terms; acquiring and possessing are *this* person's issues and not everyone's. Therefore, instead of the exchange granting satisfying permission for us to dismiss and judge whomever we identify as rich, Jesus' challenge instead points us to consider – with equal force, focus, and personalization – the legion and varied distractions that keep *us* from entering God's near presence.

Likewise, while Jesus' concern for those who suffer has plenty of clear and convicting testimony in the Gospels, in this encounter the direction for the man's disbursements is incidental. Here, Jesus focuses on the wellbeing of the stranger, not on larger issues of poverty or the unequal distribution of "possessions."¹³ Our torquing the text to set that well-intended universalizing before this one man's faithfulness again joins us in the stranger's distractions, rather than in God's promises.

Jesus emphasizes the final three verbs of his response: *have* and *come* and *follow*.

These actions counter-ballast the first three and urge assembly, rather than dissolution. Only the man's relentless efforts to earn what God offers freely have kept him from his Divine inheritance. Jesus does not – could not – condition that treasure,¹⁴ for God's hopes have awaited this man from the beginning of time! The stranger lacks only coming close and realizing that companionship. And Jesus prioritizes this man's individual turn toward God because the stranger's faithfulness – **Held In Common** with the fidelities of all those who share "eternal life" – is as important to the world's flourishing as to this one person's wellbeing. This is a mystery of

our faith! That the world's salvation could depend upon this one man's fidelity, as it does upon yours and mine.

During this time of fall, we at Trinity Church host our annual "Stewardship season" when we invite every household in our community to make a financial commitment for the upcoming year. We call this commitment a "pledge," and we view that pledge as a promise between us and the God of all creation, a covenant that we will make a priority of our relationship with this One who bears us and all that is, that was, and that will be.

A "steward" manages what is not their own, and as *Christian* stewards, we understand that *all* we have is from God. We recognize that God has chosen the Church as the primary instrument of salvation, and, by our pledge, we become partners in God's saving work. Over time, our faithful practice of generosity increasingly forms us – parishioner and parish, alike – in the image of our generous God.

For these reasons, we do not pledge simply to keep the church doors open. We give because God calls us to give, because we inherit God's promises, because we share in God's hopes. The tension, of course, is that we must keep the church's organ sounding and fund the parish's ministry, for at Trinity we spend only what we can afford, and we can afford to spend only what has been committed. Therefore, our invitation to Stewardship has two goals: **individually, we pray that every member of this congregation will give faithfully; and, communally, we pray that – together! – we will provide for the ministry to which God calls us.**

In 2025 as always, God calls us to love one another as God loves us, within these sacred walls and well beyond them. Yet as we receive that calling in this American moment, humankind's most intractable ills tempt us to underestimate the consequence of our personal and parish vocations. Our grief and anxiety about wars and storms and political madness can lead us to overlook our most immediate responsibilities, our nearest opportunities to sow grace and mercy and peace. Our hurt and anger give a well-meaning busyness that distracts us from the very ministries with the power to help heal us and all the world. We generalize, rather than personalize God's call, though – over and over again in the Gospels – Jesus carries out the salvation of the world with attention to just one person. With a whole heart, Jesus cares for them ... for you ... for me ... for us each, and *then* for us all.

Trinitarians, *have* and *come* and *follow*.

This morning, take heart that our God sees you, knows you, and holding the whole of who you are, *loves you unconditionally*. Realize that you and your faithfulness matter to God and make an important difference at Trinity Church. And – **Held In Common** with the faithfulness of all those who share in the treasure of heaven – those fidelities are as important to world's flourishing as to your wellbeing. Join in a movement greater than any one of us and receive your share in

God's grandest hope for the cosmos. Companion with this Holy One and make your faithful pledge for 2025.

Held in common by God's Love;
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Luke 18:18.

³ Matthew 19:20.

⁴ Mark 10:17.

⁵ Mark 10:19-20.

⁶ Mark 10:21.

⁷ Mark 10:21.

⁸ Mark 10:22.

⁹ Mark 10:23.

¹⁰ Mark 10:26.

¹¹ Mark 10:25.

¹² What does it mean to be rich? From online resources including a (dated) BBC article and World Bank data, the median global income appears to be about \$3,000. By that measure, I feel comfortable using "we" in this context.

¹³ Anticipating our own well-intentioned misunderstandings about Jesus' commission, the disciples will later use the same Greek word for "the poor" when they protest the woman who anoints Jesus in Bethany in Chapter 14: "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For the ointment could have been sold for more than three-hundred denarii, and the money given to *the poor*." Though the disciples scold the woman, Jesus forcefully corrects them: "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me." Neither in that powerful scene does Jesus condemn ownership or money on their own terms – he even welcomes the woman's extravagance toward him. There is another sermon in the connection between these two lessons.

¹⁴ The man's "having" joins *go* and *sell* and *give* with the same Greek word, *kai*, rendered in the sequence as "and."