

Mark 10:23–31

James Nestingen · CROSS Talk

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Amid the cacophony of political voices contending for our ears in this political season, the texts on Sunday are going to break in, and the good Lord is going to have a little word with us about our money, about our riches, and the unbelief that accompanies them. It doesn't always have to be so, but it is often enough. For most of us, living on pastors' salaries or pastors' pensions, wealth is a problem we'd like to have. Our problems are generally the opposite: stretching our resources to cover all the expenses, or hoping there will be a little left over to play with at the end of the month.

But the rich young man has left us a legacy in this Sunday's text. As you remember, last week's text leaves things unresolved. It ends with these words: "He went away grieving, for he had many possessions." Apparently, even with the salvation of the world standing right in front of him on two feet, he was still worried about his bank account. And so his unbelief, his apparent rejection of Jesus' presence and promise, leads us to the texts for today.

All four of them pick up themes from last week; each of the supporting texts takes a piece of it. We have a visit from Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, who was something of a cynic, and therefore is oftentimes kind of refreshing, actually. He is a very wise man, and he sees through the problems with money. It's just another of the vanities he punctures. So we'll be treated to his insights and his pessimism, or cynicism, you could say.

Then the psalm is from Psalm 119, and of course that is about as pious a psalm as you'll find in all one hundred fifty of them. We can expect to take a bath in piety whenever we come to this psalm. But in fact the psalm has a helpful insight for us, and we'll stop and listen to that.

Then Hebrews takes up the problem of unbelief in particular. This is the problem that preoccupies the book of Hebrews from beginning to end: some of the original members of the community have fallen away. They have lost their zeal and disappeared. So the author of Hebrews has to deal with the question of unbelief, and he does so here in a way that at first is

a little scary. But finally he turns to the word, and then the power comes on and we're ready to go.

And finally the gospel continues right out of last week's text. Jesus begins with a comment about the unbelief that oftentimes accompanies riches. He extends the indictment and speaks of how difficult it is for anyone to enter the kingdom of God. But then, with all of that, he turns to promise. So this text is full of insight, and also full of God's goodness breaking loose once more on a Sunday morning to sustain us.

So we'll follow our normal procedure. We'll spend a little time with the supporting texts and have a good visit with Qoheleth, my old friend, and then we'll go over to the gospel and work it through slowly.

The Love of Money: Ecclesiastes 5

Ecclesiastes, or Qoheleth, as it is called in the Hebrew, has been translated since Saint Jerome, and by Luther too, as "the Preacher." Maybe it was a preacher, maybe a preacher's student, but it was a wise man, well familiar with the wisdom literature, who had been around the bend a time or two and had firsthand experience with disappointment. He is jaded, a little callused. He has looked through all the human vanities and seen the end of them. So, not surprisingly, amid such a collection, he begins to talk about wealth, and there is a lot of fun in it, because he is accustomed to puncturing balloons and exposing unguarded pretenses, and he is more than willing to take us along for the ride.

"The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of laborers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep."

Here we go. This is the problem. Luther once said that the love of money is like a dropsy of the soul. This is Ecclesiastes 5:10–20. The love of money is like a dropsy of the soul: insatiable. The more you get, the more you want, and the more you want, the more disappointed you are when you get it. So money becomes a trap.

And the teacher continues: "There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture." And off we go to the races. The rich man, the rich family, the wealthy, in pursuit of their income, go off on a

bad venture, and in their desire to acquire more, they lose everything. We see this day after day in the newspapers, and day after day in our personal experience as well.

One of the paradigmatic experiences of my life came when my father was serving down in southern Wisconsin. Some people in the neighboring town starved to death. They were living on one egg apiece a day, which wasn't able to sustain them, and when their will went to probate, they had over two hundred thousand dollars in the bank. Money was so important to them that they couldn't spend it: Depression people, preoccupied with what they owned, who consequently starved rather than spend what they required. The desire for money, as Luther says in the Large Catechism, makes money a god, and then of course the god inevitably turns out to be disappointing.

By Keeping to Your Word: Psalm 119

Psalm 119 is a wonderful expression of piety concerning the law. "I love your law, O Lord. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." In the Hebrew it is a huge acrostic, in which each section of the psalm begins with one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and so it literally goes on and on and on. I'm in the habit of reading the psalms every day, and when I come to Psalm 119, I spread it out over a whole week and still never quite get to the end of it. It is a great big winter of a song, where you think spring is never going to come, or that it will come the way it comes in Minnesota, slowly, with lots of disappointments included.

So we have an expression of legal piety. But in the midst of all the fluff there is a bone in it, and that bone is a wonderful statement concerning God's word. "How can young people keep their way pure? By guarding it according to your word." There you go. That's the way to cleanse your heart of piety too, of this self-preoccupied search for religious peace. God's word takes us on in repentance and faith, and God's word leads the way into the future.

"With my whole heart I seek you." Well, most of the time; maybe some of the time; maybe ten percent of the time. "Do not let me stray from your commandments." Now it turns to prayer, and as it turns to prayer, the song becomes a lot of fun. Here we go again: "I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you." Well, good luck. "Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes." You see what happens: the psalmist keeps going back and forth between expressions of his piety and genuine prayer. And so it is the word that leads us through the piosity to the center. Amid all the temptations of life, money, religion, and all the

rest of it, God's word prevails, and God's word sustains us. So we give thanks for that, and we give thanks also for this deep loyalty to God's word, which we pray will take hold of us as well.

The Word Is Living and Active: Hebrews 4

Hebrews 4:1–13 is a very interesting text, and I want to spend a little time with you on it, because it too brings us back to the word after taking us on something of a detour.

The problem for the book of Hebrews, as I mentioned, is that there are people who have fallen away. This was a familiar problem in the early church. It used to be attributed to the delay in Christ's return, but it appears to have had other roots as well. We know that some of the people who become the most enthusiastic, who rejoice most in God's word and promises, develop other loyalties, drift away from the congregation, and we never see them again.

As I've mentioned before in talking about this problem, one of the temptations of pastors, especially younger ones, is to think that the inactives are the easiest to get, that evangelism begins by restoring the inactives to the life of the parish. It turns out they are the hardest, because their experience of the word has in some sense proofed them against it. They are suspicious and put off and hard to find. This is the problem the book of Hebrews is dealing with, in these early chapters and later as well: these people who were obviously important to the community have apparently lost their faith. They have gone away.

"Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it." Here we go. He is attempting to call them back into the life of the congregation, and he is attempting to do it by admonishing them about what they have lost.

Now, this is a very dangerous text. It seems to suggest, it definitely implies, and it will turn directly that way, that the free will has a part in this. That is the temptation when we see people leaving: to challenge them and confront them and admonish them and try to fire up their wills so that they might return. There are a couple of direct statements to that effect, as in verse 7: "Do not harden your hearts." There we go. We know this argument; it's familiar theologically: we cannot accept on our own, but we can at least soften our hearts so that we can accept. And of course the Formula of Concord rejects all such talk out of hand. To admonish the free will is to bet on the wrong horse. That's the horse that led them away. That's the horse that took them out of the community. To go to that horse and say, "Turn

around and bring them back,” is just to encourage the horse to run faster in the other direction. It doesn’t work that way.

But along with these apparent appeals to the will, there is something far more important here, and it comes in verse 12: “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” All of which is, of course, emphatically true. But just in this way the word of God is also the source of the return.

If you bet on the free will, you are betting on a horse that has already turned into an old nag, broken down and failing. But if you bet on God’s word, then there is the possibility that by speaking his word, God will rekindle the fires of the heart, renew the zeal, and bring faith again. So the goal with the lost, with those who have left, who have lost heart, who have lost their zeal, is somehow to find a way to speak the word of promise once more.

We have to say that these warnings are not to be taken lightly. Faith is not an automatic pilot that, once installed, steers through to the end of time. Faith is not something we can possess in such a way that it will never be lost. This is the saddest thing of all: that there are people like the rich young man who, on hearing and seeing the promise planted right in front of them, turn away. There are people who, on hearing the promise, interpret it to take the teeth out of it and turn it into a cheap and easy universalism, in which the gospel has become nothing but pabulum and self-endorsement, some kind of drool, some kind of ointment to be smeared on in case something hurts.

In fact the gospel is God’s word. It pierces to the center. And as it pierces to the center, it exposes our unbelief, just as it creates faith and brings newness of life. So to confess is to acknowledge the temptation.

I was with a bunch of old friends this weekend up in the state of Washington, and they were envying me my pastor and my congregation, because they don’t know where to go to church. Things have turned in the direction we all know, pastor after pastor up there, and consequently they go to church and come home brokenhearted. It’s hard and it’s difficult. The church we knew, the church we loved, the church that trained us, seems to have gone. And with that zeal being lost, the question becomes: Where do we turn? What do we do?

So this admonition is well worth our hearing. We need to examine ourselves carefully, because all of us, especially those of us who tend to think of ourselves as people of faith, have a

way of getting caught up in plans and projects, in wealth and its acquisition, in programs and their distribution. We have a way of getting caught up in all kinds of other priorities that carry us right past the First Commandment. To turn to the word is to turn to the power that carries us through, even in a situation like this. It is to turn from ourselves to the source of life: to turn from our disappointments and our regrets and our sorrows and our brokenheartedness to the promise of the one who is most content when he is raising the dead, and who likes to start with sinners like us. There we go. We'll start there.

Who Then Can Be Saved? Mark 10

Now we have this wonderful text continuing out of Mark 10, where Jesus himself is still interpreting the First Commandment. You remember that was the theme of his conversation with the rich young man who came asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?", expecting to get a list of projects so that he could become the eternal Eagle Scout and wear all his merit badges on a full sash, displaying his accomplishments to everyone.

The problem with wealth is pointed out by Qoheleth, the Preacher, in a more immediate analysis. The problem with wealth is that it impoverishes those who trust in it. Wealth becomes its own destruction. It becomes its own destruction by the fever for acquisition. It becomes its own destruction because the act of possession possesses the possessor. We get caught in it.

And so Jesus begins this text by saying how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. Why? Because at this point, as Luther points out, we start trusting in our riches. We don't just start; we get caught in a full-blown trust in what we possess, and trusting in our wealth, we regard ourselves as impervious, beyond question, beyond judgment, beyond any kind of recall.

So Jesus is in fact doing us a favor here, even though he issues it in the form of a challenge: "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Here too he is asking us to examine our priorities. What do you fear, love, and trust? What do you fear, love, and trust? If it is your money, you are in for a big disappointment. Even though it will buy you the best doctors, it won't necessarily buy you the satisfaction you seek. It has become another god, and when it becomes another god, it becomes an inevitable disappointment.

But having warmed up with our money, not a bad start, Jesus expands his observation: "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" Boy, is that the truth. Because even if

we don't fear, love, and trust our money, the heart is an idol factory, as John Calvin said in a pregnant observation. The heart creates idol after idol. As Karl Barth once said, we barely get bucked off one horse before we have our foot in the stirrup of another. We barely start to realize that our money has trapped us before we are in the market for another god. And since nature abhors a vacuum, we don't spend a lot of time shopping. Another god has us by the short hairs right from the beginning.

So it's politics, or it's weapons, or it's popular social movements, or it's a politician, or it's a husband or wife, or it's a grandchild. Just sort through them one after another, each one expected to become, in the great words of Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death*, an immortality project. I've got money now, and I can move to Lake Oswego, or go to Edina, and live happily ever after. It's like that great old cartoon from the Minneapolis paper: "We weren't born in Edina; we achieved it." There you go. My money has carried me, and of course right now it is in the process of destroying me. So here we go: the heart runs from idol to idol to idol.

"How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" This is a flat-out statement of the bondage of the will. Left to ourselves, it's not the dominion of God, the kingdom of God, that we are going to enter, but a whole range of other dominions that we have already fully occupied and become disappointed in. Golly, it's no wonder Qoheleth became so cynical. He has ridden all these vanities to their end, and he knows that at the end of each of them there is nothing but disappointment. And so election day is going to come, and the local gods are going to put themselves to the test, and we're going to hear complaint after complaint after complaint: "four more years," or "that Mormon," or whatever else. It's always the same. Our gods turn out to have not only feet of clay but claws that clutch us, even though they are impotent.

So there you go. Jesus is giving us a tour of the bondage of the will and showing us the impossibility of our own efforts. All we do is make one god after another, all of them of tin, all of them of clay.

With God All Things Are Possible

But now, after such a harsh beginning, "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God," this text starts to turn toward promise. You expect that from Jesus. He can't help it. He has to promise, because he is the Word of God incarnate, and the very purpose of God's word is to take hold of our unbelieving hearts and create in us a new heart, to bring us to newness of life, to slay the old Adam and raise up a new being. Right there.

Now the disciples are astounded at his words about the wealthy. Of course, this is the common assumption, and it is why we vote for policies that impoverish us. We all think we've got a chance to get rich sometime, and we all think that somehow or other the rich really know what is going on. Well, there's another illusion you can puncture. We'll bring in Qoheleth with his big pin, and the balloon full of manure blows up: bang, it's gone. The wealthy can't enter. We can't enter, left to ourselves; we'll create an idol and destroy ourselves on it.

But now: "Then who can be saved?" they ask. Isn't that great? They are asking the question that needs to be asked, and Jesus answers with the promise.

Now, you're a preacher. God is putting you on your hind legs with this text. And what a preacher is going to do with this text is take what Jesus states generally and turn it to the particular. Jesus says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." There's the generalization, and of course it is true: with God it's possible. But there is something even more true, and this is your job on Sunday morning: not to rest content with the generalization but to carry it to the particular and say, "He has decided to save you." Isn't that great? He has decided to save a sinner like you, and not just a sinner like you, but you, the listener. "Whoever listens to you listens to me," Jesus said. So you can take his very words and sharpen them to the point where you deliver the goods. Hand it over.

He has decided to save you, stuck in your wealth. He has decided to save you, sidled up to a tin god. He has decided to save you, who think your pistol is going to bring in the new future. He has decided to save you, who think some liberal program is going to deliver the kingdom of God. He has decided to save you, lost in the night, rambling, running, chasing from one god to the next. He has decided to save you, and so he has become your Lord.

And so he is turning the idols out onto the trash heap, because he doesn't like any rivals. When he dwells in your heart, he wants to dwell there alone, and he doesn't like to have company come and watch. He is going to take you over.

SOURCE

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Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyyKzEuDKhs>

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