

[1 Lent 2020 sermon]

1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT      FIRST LUTHERAN      MARSHALL, MN  
 MARK 10:17-31      PR. SCOTT FULLER

*Dear Friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Please join me in prayer: *Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing we may believe, and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

In the little book, You're a Good Man Charlie Brown, the young girl, Lucy, spends some time in a verbal fantasy – imagining herself as a powerful, wealthy woman.



She thinks, *When I grow up, I'm gonna be the biggest queen there ever was. I want to live in a big palace, and when I go out in my coach, all the people will wave at me...and in the summertime, I'll go to my summer palace and I'll wear my crown in swimming – and everything!!!*

Her brother, Linus, the consummate realist, can't stay quiet as he listens to his older sister's delusions of grandeur. He interrupts her with a little reality-therapy counselling by explaining that the only way to become a ruling queen is to be born into a royal family.

After protesting against such an *undemocratic idea*, Lucy transforms her fantasy into an authentically American dream. *Well then, she says, I'm gonna work very hard, and get very, very rich, and then I will BUY myself a queendom. And in the summertime, I'll go to my summer palace—and I'll wear my crown in swimming...and EVERYTHING!!!*

Wouldn't it be great to be so rich that we could buy ourselves a queen-or-kingdom??



No matter what some people say, there are some definite advantages to having money. Let's brainstorm some of those perks.

**What would or could you do if you were, as Lucy put it: *very, very rich*???**

People with a lot of money don't have to worry much about: food, insurance, household repairs, entertainment, clothing, comfort, etc. Plus, they get to enjoy things like: travel, eating out, new fashions, vacations...the list goes on and on...

The wealthy have fewer public problems, less business hassles, and more opportunities to relax... By all outward appearances, they truly seem to have something special: a Midas touch, a Leprechaun with a pot of gold, or a genie in a bottle that grants them wishes. They just somehow seem to be supernaturally blessed.

So the truth is: you and I are not so different from the ancients who believed that people with money were somehow specially blessed by God. And yet, we also know that those who are wealthy are not without problems, are they?

The rich, young man in our Gospel lesson for today is the poster child for such a case. Assured of many benefits by his *beaucoup bucks*...still he does not feel firmly formed about his future, certain about his sense of salvation, positive about his place in the hallowed halls of heaven.

When he asks the Lord, *What must I do to inherit eternal life?*, **how does Jesus respond?**

The Lord says, "*You know the commandments...*" and then he rattles off a few.



But as soon as he stops speaking, the young man...perhaps even with a wave of frustration (as some rich people do when they don't get their way), says to Jesus, *Teacher, I've been doing everything right my whole life long...*

Now, the 10 commandments are divided into two tables. The first three, we're told, are the vertical: they address our relationship with God. Let's recite them together (remember, they're on page 1160 in your red hymnal):

1. You shall have no other gods.
2. You shall not make wrongful use the name of the Lord your God.
3. Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

The second table, the next seven commandments, address our relationship with each other.

4. ... Honor your father and your mother.
5. ... You shall not murder.
6. ... You shall not commit adultery.
7. ... You shall not steal.
8. ... You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- 9 & 10 You shall not covet your neighbor's house, relationships or possessions.

**Which commandments does Jesus cite here?** Only the second...

**And what does that mean?**

I'm not positive, but it could be that the Lord is saying to him, *You have fulfilled the letter of the law – it's obvious you love God...you don't use the Lord's name in vain...you honor the Sabbath Day...* neither do you lie, cheat, kill, covet, deny or deceive. Jesus is saying, *You-n-God are good!!!*

Truly this man has been doing lots of things right: socially right, biblically right, spiritually right...and yet...in spite of all that *rightness* that he **is**, **has**, and **has done**...he's still nagged by the notion that everything is somehow...wrong. And that does not compute...

He's played by the rules.

He's followed the laws.

He's done all the *you shall*'s even as he has avoided all the *You shall not*'s...

And yet, having **done** all that *good stuff* and **avoided** all the *bad*...still he's left with the sense of needing *something more*...

### **What is it? What does he want that he cannot achieve?**

Here's my guess: that which he desires most, that which he cannot reach, that which eludes his grasp in spite of his best efforts...I believe, is simply:



*...the peace of God which passes all understanding.*

We're told by the gospel writer Mark, that Jesus looks at the righteous young man...and **loves** him!! And in that loving look, I presume, Jesus sees **both** the *goodness* on the outside...and the *hunger* that lies within. He sees a *fullness* of life's benefits...and an *emptiness* that no treasure can fill. He sees a *satisfaction* with the way the world works...and a *thirst* that no righteous effort can quench.

Jesus smiles at him and says, *I see what you need...*

Can't you just imagine seeing the frown on the man's face...**evaporate** as he anticipates, *finally*, the answer he's been seeking for so long...

And yet, from the mouth of the Lord...comes **not** a word of **relief**, but a word that acts like a *two-edged sword* aimed **straight** at the man's **heart**. *You only lack one thing*, says Jesus as the man holds his breath, and raises his eyes in anticipation of hearing this one thing that will **finally** set him **free**...

*Go*, says the Lord, *sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and come, follow me...*

The Gospel writer, Mark, tells us that when this earnest young man hears these words, *he is shocked...and goes away grieving, for he had many possessions...*

**Yet**, as it turns out, he's not the *only* one in shock, is he?? The disciples, too, are **blown away** by Jesus' amazing assertions that follow:

- how hard it is, says the Lord, for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God.
- In fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of the a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.

...Yikes!!! Is he saying that it's *sinful* to be *rich*???

No, but he *is* saying that wealth carries with it a strong, steady and stealthy attempt to **sit** on the **throne** of our lives. In fact, Jesus looks into this good man's soul and sees there...an **enemy**...**holding** the man's heart **hostage**.

It's a strange effect of **wealth** – and *our desire to have it* – that it can:

- blur our vision to what is real,
- numb our hearts to what is important in life,
- and plug our ears to the truth about love, about God,
- about life here-and-now, and about life *forever and ever...Amen?!*

**And**, just like the rich man, the disciples **also** hear Jesus make an **impossible demand**. *If wealthy people (those who are obviously blessed by God) can't get into heaven, then **who in the world can be saved**???*

In fact, Jesus has been setting up this very discussion.

Just a few verses previously in Mark, the Lord takes a **child** in his arms – a penniless, powerless, preschooler – and says, *Truly, I tell you, whoever does not receive God as a little child will never enter (the kingdom of heaven)* (Mark 10:15).

Now, on the one hand, that sounds comforting, encouraging, even cute...

**But if you think about it – would you really want to go through life as a penniless, powerless, preschooler??**

**No thank you** – which is **exactly** what the **disciples** are thinking as **well**. It moves them to exclaim, *Well then who can be saved???*

The question prompts Jesus to utter that beautiful phrase:



For people it is impossible...but not for God...for God, all things are possible. **Wow** – what a **mind-blowing**, **spirit-inspiring**, **heart-warming** thought: *with God all things are possible*.

The **guilty** are forgiven, the **sick** are healed, the **broken** are mended, the **lost** are found, the **rejected** are accepted, the **hated** are loved, the **cruel** become kind, the **angry** find peace, and the **last** become first...

**How does this miracle happen in your life and in mine?**

Well...that’s the work of the Holy Spirit...and unfortunately, it’s not a one-and-done sort of job, is it??

Wouldn’t it be great if we could simply bring children to the baptismal font, sprinkle some water on their foreheads, say a few words, offer a few prayers, then send them off into life certain that they will turn out just fine...?!?!?

No, says Martin Luther, our walk of faith is a daily thing. In the evening we're called to die to our sin – in other words, leave our burdens and sins at the foot of the cross so that we can go to sleep in peace. Then in the morning, rise to a new start in life, being born anew by letting the light of God's Son drive our guilt away as the dawn dispels the darkness of the night.

In this way, one day, we, too, might very well:

- become like little children and...grow up in faith;
- be generous with our wealth and...become rich in spirit;
- serve those who struggle in life and...be blessed with eternal life...

When that happens, when we sense the hand of God grasping us in love:

- then we can let go of our greedy grip on our possessions.
- then we can cleanse our minds of our worries about money and wealth.
- then we can let go of our fears and let God surround us with heaven's gifts,
- and then we can freely share what is ours with those who are in need.

Most of us, thankfully, will never fulfill Lucy's dream to purchase a queen-or-king-dom... Instead, the Spirit promises to make us feel content by helping become as little children, *children of the king*.

And as such, as children of the king of heaven, that allows us to do something very special. Says St. Paul in his Letter to the Hebrews, we – you and me – and everyone who hears God's word of love, together we are invited to *approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we can receive mercy and find grace in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16).

***All things are possible with God***...which means...we can even wear our crowns in swimming – and everything! Amen.