

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Holding Loosely
Mark 10:17 – 22

One of the best experiences of college was the privilege to study abroad. It was an incredible gift, which introduced me to a different culture, a different way of looking at the world, and a simpler way of living. But the truth was, though I was *informed* by my experience, I was not very *transformed*; I was still very much the same person.

During Christmas break a couple of years later, I decided to take a train from the Czech Republic, where I taught English, to Lithuania, to visit friends. These friends were Americans who felt called to minister to the students at the college. They had four children and lived a simple life as missionaries.

Do you have memories that surprise you with their vividness? You may not have a terrific memory normally, but you remember *this* particular event, down to the last detail?

Well, this trip was nearly fifteen years ago, but it is still *so* vivid. The details seem to have been *seared* into my brain. Though it was a long train trek across multiple states, I remember wearing high-heeled boots, and carrying with me not *one*, but *two* suitcases. One with the necessities, and the other chock *full* of Christmas presents. For myself. My parents had sent me a huge box of presents, and I wanted to open them on Christmas. So, I packed them in a suitcase and brought them with me to Lithuania.

I remember celebrating on Christmas Day with my friends and their guests from the college, who weren't able to go to their home countries for Christmas. I remember opening my suitcase *full* of gifts, all for me, in front of others who told me that they normally didn't have anything to open. It felt *very uncomfortable*.

Sometime later, I had a conversation with my missionary friend. I told him that I was afraid to pray sometimes, because I was nervous of what God would ask of me. I was *especially* afraid that He might ask me to give away everything I had. And instead of offering a friendly consolation, he said, "Imagine being told to do that when you have four kids and a wife to take care of!"

Frankly, I feel like *apologizing*, because I want to offer a lighter sermon after last week's sermon on divorce! To go from the topic of divorce to money and possessions, seems like an intentional form of cruel and unusual punishment. Trust me, I would *not* have chosen these texts, especially in succession! But this is exactly how Mark places them in his Gospel, and how the lectionary lays out the preaching texts. This is one of the challenges *and* gifts of following the lectionary; sometimes a text is given to the pastor to preach, which is frankly very challenging and might *not* have been chosen otherwise.

My guess is that as you heard the Gospel text read, you felt a twinge of pain, guilt, and *possibly even fear*, that God might be calling you to sell everything you have and give to the poor. Or, worse yet, you feared that this text was strategically chosen so that I can talk about stewardship to the church. I promise you, not only did I *not* choose this text, I am also *not* here to encourage you to increase your giving to the church.

This is another one of those odd and uncomfortable texts. And what I'd like to ask is that we sit with this text and allow it challenge us, instead of quickly dismissing it. Because, though Jesus' call was *specific* to this man, you and I are not so different from him.

This man is a religious man, a Jewish man, who recognizes that there is something different, something *special* about Jesus. He recognizes that Jesus seems to have a handle on the truth that other teachers don't.

Jesus offers surprising answers. He upsets people, yet he has a steady following. He is provocative, but not for the sake of being provocative.

This man wants to learn from Jesus. He is *desperate* to learn from him, so he comes *running* and *falls* at Jesus' feet. "'Good teacher,' he [asks], 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Mk 10:17b).

Jesus stops him right there. "'Why do you call me good?...No one is good but God alone'" (Mk 10:18). (pause) This is not some light conversation. Jesus' question provokes the man to consider to whom he is addressing his question: is Jesus merely a *teacher*, or is Jesus also *good* and therefore *God*? Mark doesn't tell us what the man has decided about Jesus' identity, but Jesus proceeds to talk about the commandments.

Let's back up just a bit. When the man addresses Jesus as a "good teacher," he also asks him a question. He asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. This man is not asking about some otherworldly heaven. He is asking about a great event *on earth*, the Age to Come, the Age that will bring "justice and peace, freedom for Israel, [and] punishment for evildoers." It will be "a time of prosperity when all the prophecies [will] be fulfilled, all the righteous dead [will] be raised to new life, [and] all the world [will] burst out into a new and endless spring."¹

As theologian N.T. Wright writes, "The question pressing on any Jew who believed this was: Can I be sure that I will be one of those who will inherit the Age to Come, and if so, how?"

This man *can't wait* for the Age to Come! He *needs* to know that he will be a part of it, so he runs and falls at Jesus' feet.

Other teachers of the day, such as the Pharisees and Essenes, *also* would have been asked questions like this. They would have replied with their own "detailed interpretation of the Jewish law," and probably would have "urged you to join their...group: to become a Pharisee, an Essene," or whatever group they were. Once you knew exactly how to follow the law and became a follower of this leader, you would have "the security of knowing that you would inherit the Age to Come."²

But in response to the man, Jesus doesn't *reinterpret* the law. He instead tells the man, "'You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother'" (Mk 10:19). Jesus recounts the commandments on the horizontal axis, the commandments the people of God are to keep to one another, but he *substitutes* one of them. Instead of telling the man he shall not *covet* what his neighbor has, he tells the man that he shall not *defraud*. Jesus, of course, knows the law, but he seems to substitute the command for another. Perhaps he says "you shall not defraud" instead of "you shall not covet," so that the man can say that he has kept all of these commandments.

And that's just what the man does. He states with confidence that he has kept all of these commandments since he was a boy.

¹ Tom Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 134 – 5.

² Wright, 135.

The man, we find out at the end of the story, has great wealth. And what the man has, he has obtained honestly. He has not defrauded anyone. But perhaps he *can't* say that he doesn't covet. What he has isn't enough; he needs *more*. He has amassed great wealth for himself and a great standing in the community. He is also treated as spiritually superior, because wealth is regarded as an indication of God's favor, God's blessing. He wants more and more and *more*. And he wants to inherit the Age to Come, or as Jesus calls it, the kingdom of God.

Jesus knows the man's heart. He knows that the man loves his possessions. Verse 21 says, "Jesus [looks] at him and [loves] him." He says, "'One thing you lack...Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'"

Jesus sees the man as he truly is, and he *loves* him, and then he tells him to give up *everything*. Jesus isn't angry. He doesn't look at the man with pity. He doesn't try to be impossible. Jesus knows the man's heart, that it's captive to possessions, and needs to be freed in order to follow Jesus and participate in his mission in the world.

As Western Christians, we are often quick to make *permissions* for money and possessions. We highlight the verse in 1 Timothy, which states that the *love* of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim 6:10). We emphasize that money is *neutral*; it is simply our *orientation* to money that can be a problem. But then we quickly move on without recognizing that we, like the man, are *in love* with our money and possessions.

Christian philosopher, Jacques Ellul, wrote a book entitled *Money & Power*, a *provocative* challenge to our relationship with money. He writes, "Love, in the Bible, is utterly totalitarian. It comes from the entire person; it involves the whole person and binds the whole person without distinction...Ultimately, we follow what we have loved most intensely either into eternity or into death. To love money is to be condemned to follow it in its destruction, its disappearance, its annihilation, and its death."

"Biblical love...cannot stand sharing...We cannot 'halt between two opinions'; we can neither serve nor love two masters. Because love makes us follow the beloved and nothing else, we cannot love two things at the same time."³

In Mark 10, Jesus' call to the man was *not* to be more generous, *not* to love Jesus too, *not even* to reprioritize. His call to the man was to *desacralize* his possessions, to *act against* the power his possessions had on him, to *no longer* love his possessions or to be their servant. His was a call to exchange the love of money and possessions for the love of God, demonstrated in the love of his neighbor.

But the man's heart was set. He *could not* loosen his hold on his possessions to give generously in love of God and his neighbor. "He walked away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mk 10:22b).

Wow! So what do we do with this passage? The wonderful thing about the Christian life is that everyone's call is unique to them. I can't tell you what God is calling you to do with the money and possessions with which He has entrusted you. That is between you and God. And know that when money and possessions are given, it is not in an effort to please God so that He will love you. God *already* loves you.

³ Jacques Ellul, *Money & Power*, 83.

This passage is a challenge to you and me to recognize what it is that we truly love, and we are invited *not* to walk away from Jesus. We are encouraged to *desacralize* money and possessions by holding them loosely, and freely *giving* them away. Because in the act of giving, we begin to break our love of money by placing our love of God and neighbor in their stead.

And the amazing grace is that like the man, our story is not done. You and I will vacillate between the loves of our lives, continually tempted to follow the lure of money. But Jesus does *not* walk away. He continues to look on you and me with love and call us into a deeper relationship with him and with our neighbor.

May we love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as ourself! Amen.