

# Where the Last Are First

Part 1 of Sermon Series: *The Upside-Down Kingdom*

a sermon based on

Mark 10:2-16

(with reference to Job 23:1-9, 16-17)

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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“Dear God, you made many, many poor people.  
I realize, of course, that it's no shame to be poor  
But it's no great honor, either.  
So what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?  
“If I were a rich man,  
Daidle deedle daidle  
Daidle daidle deedle daidle dumb “<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever fantasized about being rich? You know you have. I think we all have, especially this week when we keep hearing on the news about the growing Powerball and Mega-Millions jackpots (not that any of us in this room would buy a ticket). But, wow! \$345 million for Powerball and \$654 million for Mega-Millions, together that's almost one billion dollars. What would you do with that much money? Would life really be better?

I think most people would say “Yes, life would really be better.” There are challenges with having wealth, but I'm willing to put myself out there. Right?

In the interest of full disclosure, I need to admit I fantasize a little bit about wealth. Especially when I get those notices from Publishers Clearinghouse. Even though I've one twice, I think I'm pretty modest. Of course the first time that I won back in 1999 it was for a dollar made out to “THE BEARER OF THIS CHECK.” It was more fun to keep the check than cash it. It's on my office wall at home. But last year I won ten dollars. I figure that at this rate I should receive the millions they promise in 2124 when I'll only be 157 years old.

What is so wrong with wealth that Jesus tells his disciples that it will be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? All three gospels that share this story phrase it the same way “to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup> We presume it means heaven, but that's not the word Jesus used, here. In Matthew, Jesus – at various times – speaks of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God.

The rich man who runs to Jesus with his question, “What must I do, good teacher, to inherit eternal life?” (Mk 10:17) is asking about heaven. So we presume that Jesus' answer is exactly the same. This guy is a good guy. Jesus reminds him of some of the commandments, and the man replies that he has kept every one of them since his youth (that is once he was old enough to know better.) He even has evidence of God's blessing – he's rich! But there's the rub. Jesus tells him to sell what he owns – to give it to the poor – and to follow him.

Did he go away sad because he was stingy? That's what we presume, but... What if that wasn't it at all? Maybe in *trying* to butter Jesus up with “good teacher” he was merely asking Jesus for confirmation that he had already made it. After all, the evidence was there. He was rich (which everyone knows means that God loves you {sarcasm}) AND he had kept all the commandments. But what does that mean? It probably meant that he tithed – he gave ten percent – but that's the minimum expectation in Scripture, with wealth he could certainly have been more generous. This is the problem with the idea that you can “earn” your way into the kingdom of God or earn your way into heaven is that it's inherently selfish – it's about getting in – it's about getting and it leads to minimalism – because (if it worked that way) once you meet the minimum requirements, you've met the requirements. There's no need to go any farther.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerry Bock et al., writers, “If I Were a Rich Man,” in *Fiddler on the Roof: The Original Broadway Cast Recording*, RCA Victor, 2003, CD.

<sup>2</sup> Mt 19:24, Mk 10:25, Lk 18:25

Give alms to the poor because it's required. Don't steal. Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. But whenever Jesus talked about the commandments he actually made them harder. Don't murder or call another a fool. Don't commit adultery in act or in thought. Don't covet... which I'm sure is a lot easier if you're rich and have what other covet. But do you get the point?

When says, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God," Scripture tells us that "They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?'" (Mk 10:25-26) The people there – the disciples – they all thought that wealth was a guarantee of eternal life. If it's impossible for a rich man – then it's impossible for anyone. That though scared them. It could scare us.

In fact that thought is what chases a lot of people away from the church, the emergence of the prosperity gospel and the focus on changing laws to force other people to either not act impiously or to face consequences. Ironically, never an emphasis on doing good, only avoiding bad... Hmmm.

Before we go too far down this path, let me state clearly that money is not bad. It's not evil. It's a tool. Now the love of money (greed) – as St. Paul reminds Timothy – "is the root of all sorts of evil," (1 Tim 6:10) but money itself is neutral. Like the tongue it can be used to bless or curse. So we need to be careful that we don't fall into the trap that Caesarius of Arles warned about in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century of glorifying poverty or taking pride in a lack of wealth as if being impoverished were a particular blessing. With that, I agree with Reb Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" that although there is no shame in being poor it is no great honor.

The problem the rich man had wasn't that he was wealthy. The problem was that he was trusting in his own capacity to achieve favor with God. He assumed that his wealth was evidence that he had done well by God. But was he self-made? Did he inherit his wealth? Maybe he grew it, but did he have advantages that others didn't. Those who invested in Microsoft or Apple back in the early days, weren't the folks working for \$3.35 an hour (the minimum wage then) hoping to make their rent payment. Bill Gates grew up in a home that had the means to provide him with a computer so that he could eventually develop Windows.

Likewise there is a trap for the poor, often lacking the security that would give confidence to a child that she can succeed, especially with dilapidated text books or schools.

None of us – rich or poor or somewhere in the middle have the capacity to earn our way into God's kingdom – it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle – which is impossible for us mere mortals, "but for God, all things are possible." (Mk 10:28) Let us not forget that before Jesus told the man to sell what he owned he "looked at him and loved him" and then said "follow me." (Mk 10:21) Maybe the rich man had missed that portion in Scripture from Proverbs 30:7-9.

<sup>7</sup>Two things I ask of you;  
do not deny them to me before I die:  
<sup>8</sup>Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that I need,  
<sup>9</sup>or I shall be full, and deny you,  
and say, "Who is the Lord?"  
or I shall be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God.

I appreciate Reb Tevye's love for God when he continues singing: that if he were a rich man then the sweetest thing of all would be able to sit in the synagogue and pray seven hours every day. He'd really get something out of that.

But I like how Aaron Feuerstein approached his wealth. He was the third generation owner and CEO of Malden Mills (a textile firm) founded by his grandfather. On December 11, 1995 the factory burned to the ground. Mr. Feuerstein could have claimed the insurance a retired a very wealthy man. Instead, he used the insurance and took out loans to rebuild the factory, and during the six months that was happening – he paid all of the employees their full pay and covered their health insurance. Even though the finance company forced him to file chapter 11 bankruptcy and to step down as CEO when they demanded immediate payment for the loan – in an interview in 2015, he insisted that he did the right thing. That's probably why he's called the Mensch of Malden Mills. *Mensch* is a Yiddish word meaning a person of honor or integrity. This is a rich guy who knows how to thread a needle.

When Jesus tells his disciples that the last will be first, he's trying to help them look beyond status, whether it's wealth or whether it's seniority as it relates to the kingdom of God. In fact, the only person we know whom Jesus told he would get into heaven was that thief hanging on the cross next to him as he suffered for our sake (Lk 23:43) – the last man to turn to Jesus in his walk on earth, was the first to be promised paradise. That man had no time to do anything to earn his way into heaven, he could only accept the gift. Don't wait to get in line, because the first and the last get in when we follow Jesus. AMEN.