**What are we holding tightly to? October 10 2021 Mark 10:17-31**

You have probably heard the saying, “The best things in life are not things” of course it used to be “the best things in life are free” either way these saying do not seem to have been the guiding light for the main character in the story we have just heard.

This person is often referred to as the rich young ruler, however in Mark’s and Matthew’s gospel he is just called a man, later Matthew acknowledges he was young, and Luke refers to him as a ruler and later as being rich. In our story his rich status is demonstrated by the fact that “he had many possessions”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This story happens as Jesus makes his way towards Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. It also happens just after the story of Jesus becoming indignant at the disciples response to those who wanted Jesus to bless their children. He warmly welcomes them, blesses them and declares, *“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

**The approach**

As the story begins the man addresses Jesus as “good teacher” but Jesus challenges this title. Jesus sets God at the central of this conversation. Jesus points to God as the only one who is good. The man’s desire for eternal life should not be the dominant theme, God comes first. It would remind the audience of the first commandment and that God alone deserves their worship. God is central. Eternal life is a gift of God, a gracious gift of relationship with God.

Then the man shows enthusiastically ran and knelt before Jesus. This was not the usual custom. He came confidently, affirming his devotion and obedience to the law, yet still he desired a more satisfying spiritual life, hence he sought out Jesus.

However, his approach to Jesus is framed by his asking “What can I do to get eternal life?” It seems to point to him being able to procure so much during his life. (His actions have been able to control his journey in life) his attitude infers that he can still earn that which he seeks.

**The response**

Jesus was drawn towards this man, “looking at him he loved him”,[[3]](#footnote-3) he gazed intently at him, he really saw him. Jesus “eyes underscore his words”[[4]](#footnote-4) when he looks for a response from the man. Jesus invited this man to join him, to come and follow him. Yet he also lovingly challenges him.

Jesus doesn’t challenge this man’s obedience to the law, but he understood the unspoken thoughts and inclinations of this man’s heart, and so challenged his attitudes towards his wealth. Jesus challenges him to divest himself of his wealth, of “complex socio-economic ties and relationships”,[[5]](#footnote-5) of all that conveys “status and power over others”[[6]](#footnote-6) and instead to follow Jesus whole heartedly.

By pointing to God at the outset of this encounter, Jesus affirms that love and responsiveness towards God would be crucial in this encounter. This would not be about “winning God’s favour” this would be about wholehearted allegiance to God. Jesus called forth a decision from the man, regarding what was most important to him and regarding his responsiveness to God.

Jesus encouraged him “to do something contrary to the previous direction of his whole life”[[7]](#footnote-7), to sell off all he owns and give the money to the poor, and to come and follow Jesus. J. B, Philipps states, “At these words his face fell and he went away in deep distress, for he was very rich.”[[8]](#footnote-8)  The Greek participle used here conveys being shocked or even appalled and the idea of being saddened, gloomy, or grieving.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This man needed a new relationship with his possessions. “If he is to find the childlike way of discipleship set out in vs 13-16, then he must first loosen the grip on that in which he trusted now, namely his wealth.”[[10]](#footnote-10) He needs to be responsive to Jesus to trust Jesus not his own resources.

How did the story speak to the disciples and the community of their day?

The disciples’ reaction was one of exceeding astonishment. Under the ancient patronage system the aristocracy invested in synagogues, and their wealth and power were seen as demonstrating their special relationship to God.[[11]](#footnote-11) Therefore Jesus viewing wealth as a hindrance to entering God’s kingdom was hard to for people to comprehend.[[12]](#footnote-12) Jesus pointed the disciples to the reality that entry into the kingdom of God was a gift of God. He wanted them to understand that this was not possible for people to procure or earn, it was as impossible as a camel going through the eye of a needle. Though this was impossible for people to gain, for God this was not impossible, in fact it was God’s delight to graciously give this gift to those who sought it wholeheartedly. We are always dependent on the freely offered grace of God. This is God’s kingdom, with God’s rules of entry, it is not about human credentials.

**How does the story speak to us?**

So this story continues to raise many questions for us today.

How tightly do we hold our own possessions? If God spoke to us in the words Jesus spoke to this man how would we respond? Recognising the huge economic divide throughout our world, Donald English said, “it is not God’s will in his world for the minority to have the most and the majority to have the least. For that situation rich Christians, which includes most of us in the West, will be called to account, and we should be doing more about it now than we do.”[[13]](#footnote-13) What are we doing for the poor? What are we doing to address the issue of the minority of the world holding the majority of its wealth?

Is there something else that we are holding tightly which is hindering us in wholeheartedly following Jesus?

How are we responding to Jesus call to each one of us? Is there something which needs to change so that we can trust Jesus even like a little child? The servant lifestyle to which Jesus calls us all, is a costly lifestyle. In a culture with an emphasis on pleasure and instant gratification the message of servanthood is challenging. “Jesus looks intently at us and continues to quietly affirm that life is to be had not by accumulating things, but by disencumbering ourselves.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Story of richest man in the kingdom.**

There was a extremely wealthy Lord who lived in the Scottish Highlands, he owned a mansion overlooking a beautiful valley. However there was an emptiness about his life. “He had no religious belief, he lived alone, possessed by his possessions. At the entrance to his estate lived John, his he﻿rdsman, man of simple faith and deep religious ﻿commitment. “God’s presence was a reality in his home and often at night when ﻿he opened the gate to admit his employer, the lord noticed the family on their knees in prayer.” One day John had a dream in which God told him that the richest man in the Valley would die that night, so he went to warn the wealthy lord. The man replied that he didn’t believe in dreams and suggested that John forget all about it. John tried to convince him, but the wealthy lord dismissed him. However, John’s words troubled him, so he went to his doctor for a check-up who told him he was fine. The wealthy lord was still somewhat unsettled, so he asked the doctor to join him for dinner that night. They enjoyed a fine meal together but when the doctor went to leave at 11:30 the host pressed him to stay for another drink. ﻿Eventually, when midnight passed and he was still alive, the rich man farewelled the doctor, and ﻿went to bed, muttering, “Silly old John... upset my whole day”. He had barely gotten into bed when the doorbell rang. It was John’s grief-stricken daughter telling him that he father had just died. The lord froze. Suddenly he knew “who was ﻿the richest man in the valley.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Mark 10:22b [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 10:15 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mark 10:21 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lamar Williamson Jnr. *Mark: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching,* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in Leander E. Keck, et al. (Ed.) *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press 1995) 648 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark”, 648-649 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Donald English, *The Message of Mark,* (Leicester, England: Inter Varsity Press, 1992) 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mark 10:22 (J. B. Philipps) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Williamson. *Mark: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching,* 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. English, *The Message of Mark,* 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” 650 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Williamson, *Mark: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching,* 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. English, *The Message of Mark,*179 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Williamson *Mark,*  188 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Charles Arcordia, *Stories for Sharing,* (Newtown, Australia: E. J. Dwyer Pty Ltd, 1991) 118-119 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)