



March 1, 2020

Sermon Series: Hard Questions on the Way

Where Can I Find the Life I'm Looking For?  
Pastor Vern Christopherson

**Mark 10:17-31 NRSV**

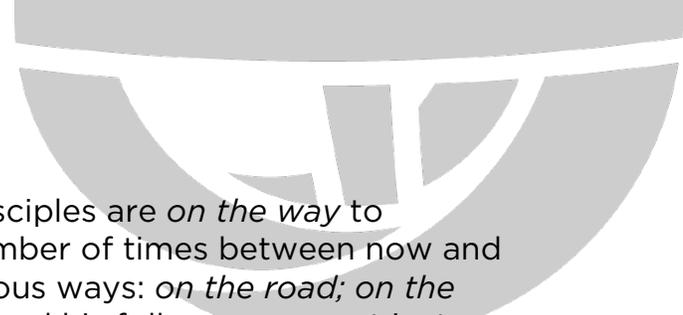
<sup>17</sup>As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>18</sup>Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup>You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.' " <sup>20</sup>He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." <sup>21</sup>Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." <sup>22</sup>When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup>Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.!" <sup>24</sup>And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup>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." <sup>26</sup>They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" <sup>27</sup>Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

<sup>28</sup>Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you."

<sup>29</sup>Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, <sup>30</sup>who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup>But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Anybody been following the stock market this past week? Even though only 50% of Americans have money in the stock market, it's hard to miss it. The coronavirus is having a big impact on our world, everything from health care to travel to the size of our pension plans. Anybody here feeling a little less secure than a month ago?



In our Bible reading for today, Jesus and the disciples are *on the way* to Jerusalem. We'll run into this little phrase a number of times between now and the end of the gospel. It gets translated in various ways: *on the road; on the journey; on the way*. It's a reminder that Jesus and his followers are not just on any journey. This is about discipleship formation. There are plenty of things for Peter, James, John, and the others to learn. Jesus has assignments for them, and challenges, and questions. The overriding concern seems to be this: Who are they going to be when they get to Jerusalem? My hunch is that the disciples, after following Jesus for awhile and often coming up short, are feeling a little less secure than before.

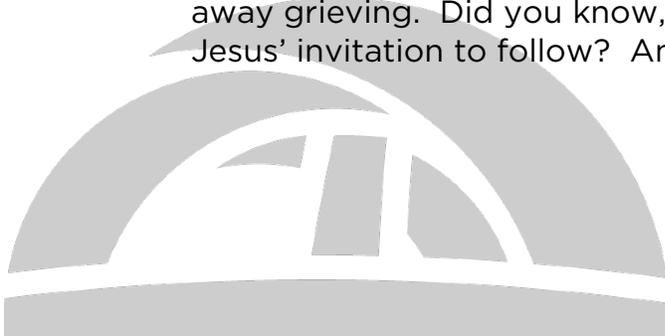
If you were here on Ash Wednesday, you heard Jesus' call: "If any want any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

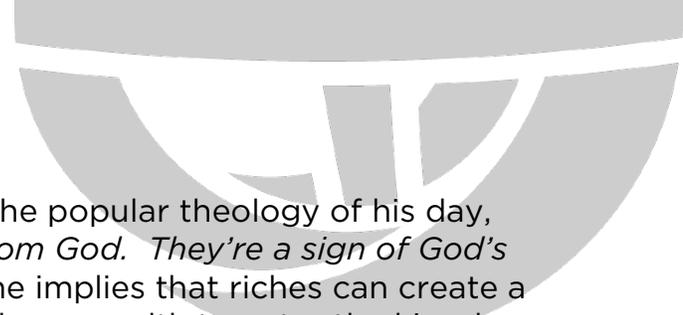
This is a challenging word. It's not just for the Twelve. There are others tagging along too. Today a man approaches Jesus. He gets down on his knees and pours out his heart, "Rabbi, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Another way to ask it is this: "Things aren't adding up for me, Teacher. Something's missing. Where can I find the life I'm looking for?" Jesus points the man in the direction of the Ten Commandments, and particularly those commandments dealing with his relationship to others: *Don't murder. Don't steal. Don't bear false witness. Don't covet. Honor your father and mother.*

The man is sincere. He says he's been doing his best to keep these commandments since he was a boy. Jesus looks at him with love in his eyes, and makes a startling claim: "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me."

Here, you thought a drop in the stock market was enough to make you nervous. What if Jesus had said that to you: *You lack one thing?* The issue of *lack* takes on a particular meaning in this story. We might lack a generous spirit, a forgiving attitude, an openness to telling the truth. Really, it's anything that keeps us from finding the life we're looking for, that keeps us from being the disciples Jesus wants us to be.

Even as I say this, however, there's no escaping it: this story *is* first and foremost about money. As Jesus tells it, we often lack in our relationship with God and each other when it comes to money. The rich man hears Jesus' words and goes away grieving. Did you know, he's the only one in Mark's Gospel that says *no* to Jesus' invitation to follow? And the reason why is money.





What's going on? Jesus is pushing up against the popular theology of his day, and maybe our day too. That is, *riches come from God. They're a sign of God's blessing.* Jesus isn't disagreeing with this, but he implies that riches can create a giant roadblock. "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It's easier for a great, big camel to squeeze through the eye of a tiny, little needle than for a rich person to get in." The disciples are stunned: "Then who can be saved?" Jesus finally shares a gracious word: "With mortals it's impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God."

So, let me ask you, have you learned any lessons about money on your journey of discipleship? We know that money does not make us happy, yet all too often we act like it does. Why? Because we live in a culture that bombards us 24/7 with the seductive message that money is the answer to our problems, and there's never enough of it to go around. Beyond that, most of us have gotten in the habit of buying things to make ourselves feel better. It doesn't work, at least not for long, but we've been so conditioned to try that when a new TV or phone or shoes or sweater or cookware doesn't give us a lift for long, we tend to look for something else to buy that will.

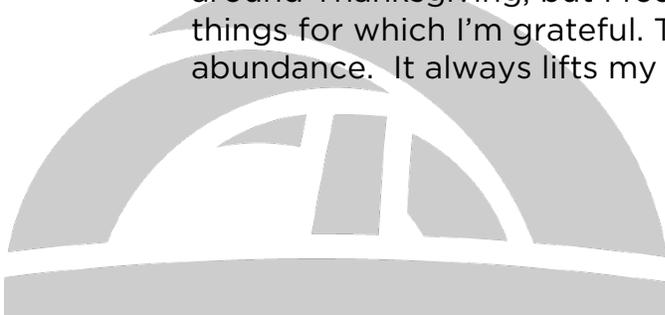
Is there hope for us? I want to believe there is. "With mortals it's impossible, but not with God. All things are possible with God."

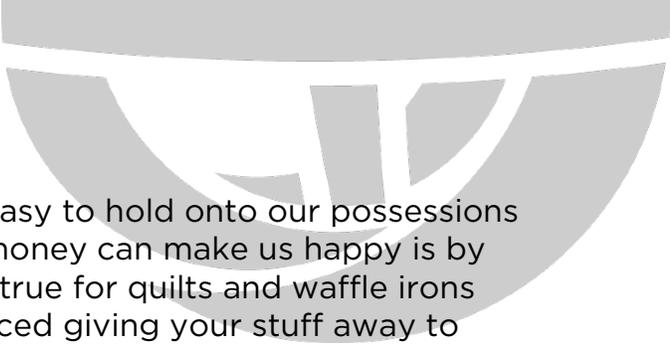
Please hear me: we are saved by grace through faith. I firmly believe that. But when we meet Jesus *on the way*, he doesn't offer a *cheap-grace* solution that allows us to carry on business as usual. Remember: being on the way to Jerusalem and the cross is about discipleship formation. We're still on the way. We haven't yet arrived. Jesus isn't concerned only about our eternal destiny, but with the life we live here and now—with each other—in God's great big world.

Friends, as your discipleship is being formed, I have three simple suggestions for you:

First, *practice your faith in everyday life.* Here's an idea: Get a dollar bill. Circle the words on the back: "In God We Trust." From time to time, take out that dollar and reflect on these words. Ask yourself: What would I spend this week if I trusted God? What would I buy? What would I refrain from buying? And how should I care for the things God has already given me?

Second, *move from a mentality of scarcity to one of abundance.* Do you have enough? Compared with the rest of the world, we have more than enough. To help with this, I keep a gratitude journal. I often think of it only in November, around Thanksgiving, but I feel better when I end my day by jotting down a few things for which I'm grateful. This helps me move from a feeling of scarcity to abundance. It always lifts my spirits. What if we did this more?





Third, *get in the habit of giving stuff away*. It's easy to hold onto our possessions too tightly. Research shows that the only way money can make us happy is by sharing it with others. I suspect the same holds true for quilts and waffle irons and antique clocks. What if you regularly practiced giving your stuff away to somebody who could use it more than you?

We live in a house in south Minneapolis that's a 100-years-old. We've been in that house for 30 years and counting. Truth be told, in that time we've collected way too much stuff. Every so often I look around at that stuff and think, "We need to downsize." But here's the deal—too often I start thinking: If I fixed up this thing, and painted that thing and replaced this thinga-ma-jig, why, we could have a giant garage sale, and bring in tons of money and just imagine what we could do with it: Take a trip! Put it in the bank! Buy more stuff!

I wonder what Jesus thinks when I have thoughts like that? I'm not sure I want to know. But here's what I hope: I hope Jesus looks at me with love in his eyes and thinks: "This guy could really use some discipleship formation." And when that formation happens, who knows what Jesus might suggest, maybe: "How about gathering up all those things, selling them, and giving the money to the poor?"

Okay, Jesus, now you're getting personal. Then again, if I *am* lacking something in my life, Jesus, I want you to point that out, at least on my better days. I want to find the life I'm looking for, and that probably means you'll want me to change. Indeed, as I'm *on the way* to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus, deep down I want to find the life you're offering me.

Friends, I bet deep down you do too. Amen.

