Text: Mark 10:23-31

**Introduction**

Some of the things that Jesus says are hard because they are a little cryptic. They require us to ponder them a bit. Or experience something we just haven’t yet. Phrases like maybe, “I have not come to bring peace, but the sword.” Preachers love those sayings, because they make us feel smart and useful. Hopefully we can help the people of God ponder and understand them. But then there are the teachings of Jesus that aren’t hard because they are cryptic, they are hard because they are very clear. They are clear and we do not want to hear them. And those passages are huge temptations for preachers. To use any eloquence or intelligence we have to fog things up. To make the clarity of Jesus more obscure. Obscure enough that we all can continue doing what we want comfortably ignoring what Jesus says. Mark chapter 10 is packed with those clear teachings and temptations. Divorce, sexuality and money.

As cryptic as “if you do not eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood you have no life in you” was. And according to John that teaching caused many to no longer follow him, but brought out of Peter “Lord, to whom shall we go.” As cryptic that is, Jesus in Mark 10 is clear. “How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.”

**Trouble in the world**

Now there are all kinds of ways that we can try and fog that up. The most simple way is probably to deny being wealthy. Because to a certain extent wealth is relative and we can always compare ourselves to our neighbor who has more. You can always tell where that bar is in a political season by where the candidates choose to promise “if you make less that X, you will not have your taxes raised.” When Bill Clinton first used that phrase if my memory is correct it was $75,000. In our current season it is $400,000. That’s the popular definition of wealthy. Of course the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal have stock articles about people making half a mil who are living paycheck to paycheck. Those articles are often rightly mocked, but they exist for the same reason preachers fog Jesus’ clear statements. Their audience demands someone to defend their budgets, what they have chosen to do, also.

But there are two answers to this attempt to deny that Jesus’ teaching calls us out. The first is to say, stop comparing ourselves to Elon Musk and realize that we are Americans - the most fabulously wealthy people the world has ever seen. That our denial of that wealth is based on keeping up with the Joneses. My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends. But even being honest about relative wealth I think misses the deeper theological truth. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike. As Luther would say to the first article of the creed, “He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.” The providence of God is not one of scarcity. It is only our sinful choices – sometimes as individuals and sometimes systemic – that create famine. Famine is never a problem of providence, but always of politics.

**Trouble in the Text**

Straight up denial that the teaching applies to us is a universal way of trying to avoid it, but in the disciples’ reaction, there are a couple of more subtle ways.

The first of these is about how we relate to money or wealth itself. If we remember last week, the scene that is still fresh in everyone’s mind – the man is likely still visible walking away disheartened and sorrowful – is the Rich Young Ruler. He came to Jesus with an honest question. And Jesus loved him. He loved him by telling him the truth, by making it clear to him that he loved his wealth more than he loved God.

What has the disciples flabbergasted – “they were amazed at his words…exceedingly astonished, ‘then who can be saved?’” – is natural man’s assumption. We all naturally assume that wealth is the outward symbol of God’s love. Or maybe even more sinister, wealth is God’s approval of the life that we are leading. The assumption is that the wealthy are more righteous. And if getting even the wealthy into heaven is like a camel going through the eye of the needle, then can anyone be saved?

But that is the wrong way to look at such wealth. “The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.” What we have been provided by Almighty God is not a reward for services already rendered. But what we have has been given to us in trust. The owner of the estate was going on a long journey, so he divided it and entrusted it to his servants. To one he gave five talents, to another three, to another one. There are other similar parables. The abundance of the providence of God has been entrusted to us. And not fairly as we typically understand fair. God doesn’t seem to be a communist. It is all his and he gives as he pleases and will not countenance complaints about his judgements. But it is not given as a reward. “To him who has much, much will be required (Luke 12:47).” Probably the source of the proverb “the one God wishes to destroy he first gives great wealth.” How we use what we have been given is a test of faith. And the more we have, the more we become like the rich young ruler, trusting the wealth itself, more than the one who granted it and desires it be put to work for the Kingdom.

The teacher of Ecclesiastes might be the first to recognize the problem. “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money.” When John Rockefeller – the relatively richest man the world has ever seen – was asked how much was enough, he responded “A little more.” We can easily lose our faith in the one who provides and come to trust the unrighteous mammon itself. Echoing a more cryptic phrase of Jesus. Trusting the wealth itself, instead of using that unrighteous mammon to be welcomed into eternal tents (Luke 16:9). The call is to rightly order our loves. Seek first the Kingdom. Order your temporal existence, the unrighteous wealth with which you have been entrusted, order it toward eternal riches.

For most of us that is the much greater trouble. We struggle life-long with the test of faith that is how we use the wealth given to us. But there is ditch on the other side of the road. The disciples quickly discern that. Or at least Peter does. “See, we have left everything and followed you.” We humans can create status pyramids out of almost anything. If the favor of God is not displayed in how much we have, is the Jesus status pyramid how much we have given up? Immediately after this scene James and John are going to ask for the thrones on the left and right of Jesus. After all they were not shore fishermen throwing nets like Peter. They were in their father Zebedee’s boat. They were the sons of Zebedee and Sons, Fishmongers. They had given up more than Peter.

But to this idea that all Jesus is doing is inverting the world’s status pyramid Jesus gives two words. The first is the promise that correctly ordering one’s love – seeking the kingdom first – is not without its rewards even in this world. “there is no one who has left…who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time.” The providence of God shall be enough. Even if we should remember that it comes in this world with persecutions to those who would rightly order the kingdoms. But more importantly, the rewards of the Kingdom – if we call them that – are more about the age to come. And that Kingdom scrambles all our status pyramids. The first will be last and the last first. And our ability to discern first and last isn’t that hot. Most of us are not Peter, James and John – or the rich young ruler – called to give it all up. And if that is not our call, it is only pride that would lead us to try it.

**Gospel**

Now maybe all I’ve done so far is fog things up. I hope not. I do know that most of what I’ve talked about so far is the law. The ways we fail to put the Kingdom first in regards to the wealth entrusted to us. The way we might be tempted to pride. And I’ve left to the last what gets placed in the middle in the gospel text. It is in the middle of that text, because it is the most important. If the ditch to one side of wealth is that we see it as a judgement and reward of our righteousness instead of a test of faith. And the ditch to the other side is a pride in disdaining the things of this world seeking heavenly status. The good news is the narrow road in the middle.

“Who then can be saved?”

“With man it is impossible.” Like the teaching on divorce and sexuality. This is a hard teaching. And on our own it is impossible. We are always going to find ourselves in one ditch or the other. The Rich Young Ruler had asked Jesus what he needed to **do**. And the law does have an answer. It is just that with man that law is impossible. Even if it is good and wise. “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”

Jesus did not take equality with God – riches beyond imagining – as something to be grasped, but gave it all up to become man.

But neither in that emptying did Jesus demand anything of his Father. He was not building a status pyramid. He entrusted his spirit into the Father’s hands. That cross is the impossible made possible. That cross is the camel going through the eye of the needle. Our brother opening the door of heaven.

Our failures to put the kingdom first, end there. Our pride, and status seeking, ends there. There we see the last man, who becomes the first born of the new creation. There is the eye of the needle. There is the impossible made possible. For us. Amen.