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[Mark 10:17-31](#)

He's so hopeful. Right? He's dedicated. He knows Scripture, including all the commandments. Intriguingly he lists the second half of the commandments – the ones about *relations among people*. Right before we hear this rich man's story, Jesus has laid down a little anti-divorce teaching (we hope to show how human connections aren't expendable and those on the understand of public power, like women, can't be easily set aside – though I think it's a hard message that one). And we get a little riff on how everyone ought to become like children to be in the Jesus community. Again, those on the underside of community right? Then boom. Mr Richie Rich. He's so hopeful. He's not a braggart. We like to make him pompous but he's not. He's saying, here's my plan, how am I doing? I'm working on all these good things. It's hard but I'm a justice seeker. This isn't a passage to belittle the law or commandments either - which would be very problematic and anti-Jewish in a way Mark's Jesus would NEVER be and we should never be either. It's to say, this is one of the good guys. He's hopeful. He's working it.

And then Jesus lays down the catch. Mark's Jesus is my favorite. You're probably not supposed to pick a favorite right? But I like the sharpness of Mark. Jesus is here the magician, the healer, the one whose unwieldy power is sometimes grabbed from him from behind without him knowing who did it ... He's no eloquent moderate teacher with long speeches of Luke or the self-identity I am-I am guy of John. He's no new Moses like Matthew's. Here he's quick, does everything "immediately" and then tells everyone it's a big secret don't tell. But they told. And we're still telling. His disciples don't get him for half the gospel. They're dense. "Uh, what do you mean Jesus?" Only the demons and women get him. I'm into this Jesus.

I think as listeners we often identify with Jesus in the story. I mean, he's the Christ and we're Christ-ians after all. But I think we're meant to be the disciples. And here

we're the rich man. We're so beautifully well intentioned. We WANT to do the right things to bring about things on earth as they are in heaven. We forgive debts and we forgive our debtors, right? Or we pray to each week. So when Jesus lays down the catch, he doesn't give it the old "gotcha!" Ha. Hypocrite! Some outtake we could put on a late night show, with pundits running clips to prove we don't practice what we preach.

But Jesus? Wild, hairy, John the Baptist dunked Jesus? This Jesus, looking at him "loved him" and said "You lack one thing..." It's so tender. And so inevitable. Paved with good intentions. You're doing all.the.things. Except one. But it turns out this "one" is not such a minor one at all. It's not a simple task but a **structural** one. It's often puzzled Christians. And it saddens our poor fellow traveler.

What's so bad about being rich? Can't we use our money in the service of the poor? Can't we buy bread? Be an influencer, a lobbyist for the Good, the Beautiful, The One Truth?

Obviously. But if we write this off as personal and say- heck I'm not rich so this isn't about me...we miss the bigger issue. The rich we say, we insist, simply have more money than others, they aren't categorically different. But that's a change in our culture. As an ethicist friend wrote in Washington Post not so long ago:

"We [Americans] used to think that having vast sums of money was bad ...— that it harmed your character, warping your behavior and corrupting your soul. We thought the rich were different, and different for the worse...We now see wealth as morally neutral." He points out that this contradicts lots of religious teaching.... The idea that wealth is morally perilous has an impressive religious pedigree. 'Stoic philosophers, the Buddha, Confucius, Aristotle, Quran and Jesus.

"The point is not necessarily that wealth is intrinsically and everywhere evil, but that it is **dangerous** — that it should be eyed with **caution and suspicion**, and definitely not pursued as an end in itself;

that **great riches pose great risks to their owners**; and that societies are right to stigmatize the storing up of untold wealth." Think Mr Potter in It's a Wonderful Life.

Or Pope Francis who "**proclaimed** that unless wealth is used for the good of society, and above all for the good of the poor, it is an instrument "of corruption and death.""

Wealth has for millennia been recognized as morally dangerous then. And our recent ostentatious accumulation is a deliberate and flagrant silencing of those criticisms. There are many studies showing the rich evade more taxes, pay proportionately less to the common good. Think of that widow's mite parable. They add more to the climate crisis. As we've heard in the election cycle press- you don't *make* a billion dollars you *take* it. (AOC) We try to latch onto the individual accountability in order to hide the **lurking structural demon**.

Cue story of the rich man a camel and a needle. Or the Talmud says an elephant. Upping the game.

This teacher sees the underbelly, the deep systems of power and influence. He can open the eyes of the blind. So what aren't we seeing?

Now my task is to figure out how I am the rich man? What is my "money"? There are a lot of things to choose from, but the one that feels deeply systemic in the same way to me is racism. But not racism instead of money, racism and its ties to money. What if a residual, almost invisible, under the surface system of racism in church and society makes it more difficult to live in communion with our Superabundant God of Love? What if I act from the unexamined power of that racism without even noticing it? How does it hold me and others back?

The Rev Lenny Duncan recently came to town to lead discussion on his book *Dear Church. A Love Letter from a Black Preacher to the Whitest Denomination in the US*. He spoke some difficult truths and some challenges. He reassured us. You've done so much so well. We just lack just one thing.

To dismantle white supremacy in our society and theology.

Duncan called us into relationship, reconciliation, and reparations. All literally. Reparative work on racial injustice will not come easily to our country and it has a price tag. If our church building is on stolen land what do we do? If our White House was built by slaves, stolen bodies and labor what do we do? If our school district has opportunities that others' don't because we tie school funding to property taxes, what do we do? If generations of amassed wealth were denied through redlining, horrifying lending practices, and unequal opportunities, how do we go forward? If executive boards all come from the same demographic and then hand out access to money-making and influence?

How amidst this is it possible that we can be “saved”? How can anyone do it, the disciples ask. We ask. And “saved” here is less about some other life after death than a new kind of kingdom/realm/society here and now. If we have to dismantle white supremacy, economic injustice, and our complicity in it- how will it ever happen? It’s overwhelming and impossible. We turn away, dejected. For surely we are tied up in this.

But on Ash Wed we heard the words of reassurance that with God all things are possible. We heard them again today several times.

Mark’s community lives in a kind of electric intensity- a power of possibility brought about by charismatic reciprocal love modeled on God’s own way of loving. We start there. Now their leader was executed by an occupying police force of the empire, the Roman empire. It wasn’t all rosy. It’s still unfurling.

SO none of this is accomplished immediately. But our commitment and *insight*- our *vision*, our *seeing* that this is the work to do, that is immediate.

Just after our rich man story, the impetuous disciples are walking with Jesus squabbling about who is greater. Did they NOT just hear the whole exchange with Richie Rich? A blind beggar cries out for healing. The band of brothers try to shut him down. But Jesus asks him straight up “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man says “Teacher/Rabbi, let me see again.” Jesus said “Your faith has made you well.” Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus. After that, the whole gospel opens up. It’s a turning point in the narrative. People get it. They SEE like they’ve never seen before. And they LIVE it. Even when they don’t know the exact way to get there. Even when it’s not accomplished in one generation. Jesus turned to them in love. And said, it’s time to do

Just.

This.

One.

Thing.

Now it’s our turn.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/being-rich-wrecks-your-soul-we-used-to-know-that/2017/07/28/7d3e2b90-5ab3-11e7-9fc6-c7ef4bc58d13_story.html