

Mk 10:17-31

*Tim Anderson 18/6/2023*

Well money is a tough subject.

Not my favourite to speak on.

It's a few years since I've preached a sermon on money.

But you get to the rich young ruler and you can't avoid it.

It's one of the great advantages

of preaching systematically through chunks of the Bible.

You can't avoid the hard subjects.

And when you talk about the hard subjects,

people know you didn't chose that subject

because you have a beef with the congregation,

it's just because that's what the Bible says.

Money may not be my favourite topic to preach on,

but it was one of Jesus' favourite subjects to speak on.

For every time Jesus warned his hearers on sexual sin,

he warned them 10 times about the perils of money.

Of course we do need to encourage faithfulness to God

in all areas of life.

But Jesus spoke more about money,

because he knew that money is a big trap.

Money is probably the number one thing

that pulls people away from God.

It's interesting when you look at world religions,

that all except Christianity have their centre where they were founded.

The centre of Islam is in the Middle East.

The centre of Hinduism is in India.

The centre of Judaism is in Israel.

The centre of Buddhism is in Asia.

But Christianity has a moving centre.

Christianity started in Jerusalem.

But when the despised Gentiles embraced Christianity vigorously,

the centre of Christianity moved to Rome and Constantinople.

Then a few centuries on,

the unwashed barbarians among the Celts, Anglo Saxons and Franks embraced Christianity with vigour.

And the centre of Christianity moved to Northern Europe and then through migration to North America.

And there it stayed until the start of the 20th century.

And then there was an explosion of Christianity in Africa and Asia.

Most of the world's Christians today live in Africa and Asia.

Africa was 1% Christian in 1900,

now it's 50% Christian.

A distinguished historian Andrew Walls was asked about the changing centre of Christianity.

Why does it move?

All the other religions stay the same.

Now no doubt there are lots of contributing factors.

But Walls pointed out that the centre of Christianity

moves away from wealth and privilege towards the poor and outcast.

Why is that?

Because when Christianity is in a place of wealth and power for a long time,

the radical message of sin and grace and the cross can become muted or lost.

The Christianity in the wealthy context changes

to become a message of a safe religion

for nice people who want to be good.

It gets stripped of its power.

And so its centre moves to somewhere

where the true message of the cross

is invigorated by the power of the God's Spirit.

Well that's a bit of a lead in

to Jesus' conversation with the rich young ruler.

Here was a man who had a great desire to be good.

He'd kept all of the commands of the Old Testament since he was a boy.

And he came to Jesus,

because he had a nagging desire  
to know if he was good enough for God.  
Had he lived a good enough life to be given eternal life?  
"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"  
He's ready to do something impressive,  
if that's what Jesus says is necessary.

Jesus initially answers him with a question.  
Why do you call me good?  
No one is good except God alone.  
Jesus is actually perfect.  
He is actually God the Son.  
He's not denying that.  
But he's speaking to the man at the level he understands.  
The man thinks Jesus is a good and morally upright rabbi.  
Jesus wants him to understand  
that no human is good enough under their own steam -  
even a morally upright rabbi is not good enough.  
If you think a rabbi is good,  
you need to adjust your idea of goodness.  
No one is good except God alone.  
The man can tell Jesus about how he hasn't committed any of the crimes  
specified in the ten commandments.  
Jesus' response is revealing.  
"One thing you lack,  
God sell everything you have and give to the poor,  
and you will have treasure in heaven.  
Then come follow me."

What would you say to a morally upright non Christian  
if they asked you how to receive eternal life?  
I would certainly get to Jesus' last sentence.  
"Come follow me."  
You can't be saved without following Jesus.

Moral uprightness won't get you there.

But I would not tell them that they have to sell everything they have.

That seems extreme, Jesus.

Is that what it takes to be a Christian?

Not in every case.

This is the only person who Jesus told to sell everything he had.

But Jesus told lots of people to follow him.

What it takes to be a Christian is to repent of your sins,  
and put your faith in Jesus.

But to repent of your sins,

you've actually got to change how you've been using your good things,  
as well as not doing bad things.

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as well as not doing bad things.

Being self focused is a sin.

If your use of the blessings God has given you  
has been focused on yourself,

then that is selfish,

that is sin.

And I say that looking in the mirror  
and knowing I'm talking to myself too.

For the rich young ruler,  
money had taken the place in his life,  
that God the Father had in Jesus' life.

Jesus loved the Father.

Jesus lived to serve the Father.

This man loved his money.

He lived to serve his money.

How can you tell if your money has a hold on you?

There is a clear answer in the story.

If you can't give large amounts of it away,  
then money has you in its grip.

And when money has you in its grip,  
it has incredible power to keep you from God.  
Money is a great trap.  
When money becomes a scorecard on which you assess life,  
then it has you in its grip.  
If you look at your peers,  
and you feel that the ones who have made more money than you  
have done better in life,  
then money is a scorecard and that's a trap.  
Giving it away stops it being a trap.

Let me address the particular questions of giving to the church.  
There are lots of good Christian ministries you could give money to,  
but the church is one of those and we are in church,  
so I'll talk about that one for a minute.  
Over the years, I've heard lots of reasons  
given by otherwise good and faithful Christians  
as to why they don't want to give money to the church.  
Here's reason number 1.  
"The church is an incredibly wealthy organisation.  
Look at the opulence on display in Vatican City.  
The Sistine chapel is incredibly beautiful and ornate.  
I can't imagine how much it would cost  
to commission a building like that today -  
Even if you could find someone of the gifts of Michelangelo to paint it."  
The money should be given to the poor.  
What can I say?  
It's all true.  
But ...  
Once Michelangelo has painted the church  
it becomes a treasure of the human race,  
and one aimed at bringing glory to the one true God.  
You can't very well sell it.  
And in any case the money you give to your local church  
doesn't go towards propping up Vatican artworks

or other displays of church opulence.

Why not instead look at the things your local church actually does.

Is it worth having Sunday services where the word of God is preached?

Is it worth having ministry to children and youth in Hastings?

Is it worth offering a free community meal to the local community here?

Is it worth supporting missionaries like Anna Radkovic or ministries like BCA or the cow project with ARDFA?

Those are the questions about what we actually do.

The opulence in Vatican city can only ever be an excuse as to why you wouldn't give to Holy Trinity Hastings.

Here's reason number 2 I've heard given for not giving to the church.

Anglican ministers are paid too much.

Again, it's probably true.

Anglican ministers are paid like professionals - roughly equivalent to a school teacher.

That likely seems an outrageous amount if you're a pensioner.

But ...

The minimum amount an Anglican minister gets paid is totally out of the control of Parish Council or me.

Some parishes in the leafy eastern suburbs decide to pay their ministers more than the minimum the diocese sets.

That's not really our concern.

We pay the minimum rate set by the diocese.

Catholic priests get paid less.

But they aren't supporting a family.

And their church provides housing for them in retirement.

The question really is,

if the minister gets paid a bit too much,

is it being used to fund a lavish lifestyle,

or is it being generously used to further God's kingdom?

You can make your own mind up on that one.

But here's a thought.

In the Anglican Church, the amount that a minister gets paid doesn't actually change if people give more or less.

What changes if people give more or less  
is how much the church has to spend on other priorities.

Here's reason number 3 people give me  
about why they don't give to the church.

"We should give to the poor."

Real Christian giving is supporting WPCS.

Real Christian giving is giving to Save the Children fund  
or Fred Hollows foundation.

But ...

Why is it an either or?

Can't we do both?

When the woman poured very expensive perfume on Jesus' feet.

Judas said, 'Why this waste?'

Jesus said, 'The poor you will always have with you.

You will not always have me.'

In other words being a blessing to Jesus

shouldn't be set up against being a blessing to the poor.

And one way, perhaps the main way of being a blessing to Jesus today,  
is to be a blessing to his body, the church.

And there are things we can do that directly benefit the poor  
that are also a blessing the church.

Our family will always prioritise sponsoring children through  
Compassion over World Vision

because Compassion helps children

through the outreach of local churches in poor countries.

I would rather support a hospital through ARDFA  
than Fred Hollows foundation.

In both cases poor people get medical support.

But only ARDFA will give glory to God while they are doing it.

We do want to care for people's bodies

but we want to care for their souls as well.

My point in giving you answers

to those three reasons not to give to the church,

is to show you that they are excuses not reasons.  
If those excuses are shaping your behaviour regarding giving,  
then you need to ask the question,  
has money caught me in its trap?  
Am I going to walk away from Jesus sad,  
like the rich young ruler did?

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples,  
"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

It is very hard.

There's nothing inherently evil about money,  
but it is a great trap.

It's so hard to put Jesus first,  
when money is clamouring to be put first.  
Jesus' disciples were amazed at his words.

It was the standard view back then,  
that if you were wealthy,  
that was a sign that God was pleased with you.

So it was totally opposite to their expectation.  
They thought - rich person - must be spiritually on track.  
Jesus says - rich person - in great spiritual danger.

In fact says Jesus,

"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle  
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

That's one of Jesus' best known sayings.

And it's spawned its own little fairy tale.

You might have heard the story about a gate in the city of Jerusalem  
called the eye of the needle,

and it was so narrow

that camels had to take all their baggage off to get through it.

It's totally made up.

Some preacher thought of a good story 150 years ago  
and the story developed a life of its own.

What Jesus is actually saying is that in human terms,  
it's totally impossible.



A camel can't get through the eye of a needle.  
A rich person under their own steam can't enter the kingdom of God.  
But as Jesus says in 10:27 'all things are possible with God'.  
He not talking about me becoming World Chess Champion  
or you becoming a supermodel  
or any other irrelevant flights of fancy.  
What he's saying is that  
God is so powerful,  
that he can even unshackle a rich person's heart  
from the snare of their possessions.  
God can do what in human terms is impossible.  
Separating a wealthy person from their love of their stuff  
is not possible for human beings.  
You try going up to Gina Reinhardt  
and telling her to stop loving her money.  
It won't work.  
But God can do it.  
He can detach a wealthy person's heart from their cash.

Well Peter was watching the interaction Jesus had  
with the rich young ruler.  
"We've left everything to follow you!"  
That young man might not have been willing to leave it all behind,  
but Peter and his companions had.  
And Jesus told Peter what his reward would be.  
A hundred times as much in this present age, with persecutions,  
and eternal life in the age to come.  
God is no one's debtor.  
He doesn't fail to reward his servants  
who make sacrifices for his kingdom.

But as well as looking at it from Peter's perspective,  
we ought also to look at it from Jesus' perspective.  
You see Jesus wasn't asking the rich young ruler  
to leave behind anything more than Jesus had himself left.

If the rich young ruler had sold his possessions,  
given the money to the poor and followed Jesus,  
he would have left behind great wealth.

But when Jesus came to earth,  
he left behind even greater wealth.

All the wealth of heaven belonged to Jesus  
sitting at the Father's right hand.

Now I'm sure they don't have denarii or dollars in heaven.

But heaven is immeasurably more beautiful and splendid than earth.

And it all belonged to Jesus.

The angels were constantly praising the majesty and glory of the Son.

Jesus was royalty in the greatest kingdom of them all.

And he left it all behind.

"Emptied himself of all but love" as the hymn writer put it.

"Made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant" as Paul put it in Philippians.

For our benefit.

He left it all behind for the rich young ruler.

If only the rich young ruler had realised that.

Paul put it this way in his second letter to the Corinthians.

2 Cor 8:9 "Though he was rich,

yet for your sakes he became poor,

so that you through his poverty might become rich."

The cross sets us the standard of Christian giving.

Jesus didn't think,

"What's the bare minimum

of the privileges of heaven that I can relinquish

in order to save those ungrateful sods on earth?"

Jesus willingly relinquished it all.

And so when we give,

our question is not,

"How much is the minimum I have to give away?"

Our question is,

"How much is it possible for me to give away?"

What is the best response of love I can make  
to the Lord who loved me?