

October 14, 2012

**Psalm 22:1-15, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31**

Message by Charis Mitchell

The scriptures for today are very heavy, emotional, challenging passages. Hebrews invokes images of God “dividing soul from spirit, joints from marrow.” Jesus is telling us that it is easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than for someone with earthly possessions to get into heaven. Then we have the Psalm: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I cry by day, but you do not answer. I am a worm; all who see me mock me. I am poured out like water, my bones are like wax, you lay me in the dust of death.” Not exactly warm fuzzy images. What happened to Jesus hugging children, saying “Let them come to me?”

I will admit, I’ve struggled with these scriptures quite a bit over the course of the sermon preparation for today.

When I initially read these scriptures, especially the Mark passage, I thought, “oh, ok, this is another of those, ‘give money to the church to get into heaven’ scriptures for the stewardship drive, trying to guilt people into giving more. I got this!” But the more I looked at it, the more I realized was in the passage. And here’s the twist: it doesn’t actually say anything about donating anything to the church. Oops! Maybe God intends more for a stewardship drive, and demands more of us as Christians than just handing over a check, or even giving away everything we own? Is it possible that we have been called to do more than just follow rules and be charitable?

But we'll get back to that in just a bit.

Let's start at the beginning of the Mark scripture.

In one commentary I read this week, it said that the journey Jesus was starting at the beginning of today's reading is actually the beginning of his final journey to Jerusalem and crucifixion. This isn't just your usual "teaching and healing the sick" jaunt around the Holy Land. Think Jesus might have been having some doubts? I have a feeling that may be what fueled the, "Why do you call me good?" response.

Have you ever been in a situation where you've been feeling particularly petty or self-involved or mean-spirited, or just generally not-so-holy, and of course that's the point in time that someone comes out of nowhere and tells you what an inspirational person you are? Tends to leave you feeling about 6 inches tall. I think God gives us those moments to remind us, "hey, there's more going on than just what's in your head!" We are constantly a lesson for others, and you never know what kind of impression you might be making. We all have bad moments, but by the grace of God we keep going.

Maybe Jesus was contemplating heading out for this journey toward his eventual torturous death and how he really *really* wished there was another way to go about this whole saving the world thing, and a rich man walks up calling him the "Good Teacher". Salt in a wound much?

Another interpretation I ran across is that Jesus is saying that nobody is *inherently* good but God alone. In Jesus's time those with worldly possessions, the "rich", were considered to be blessed, especially in the secular world. They must have been doing the right thing, and they must have had their stuff together in order to be so fortunate. They were thought to be the righteous, following the Ten Commandments, and therefore, were thought to be looked upon favorably by God. And is it so different today? Those with material possessions, the "rich", have greater sway over politics, society, and culture. When a millionaire, a politician, or a Hollywood celebrity has something to say about how to live, it's splashed all over the media. When was the last time you saw a penniless, homeless vagabond get the entire world to stand up and take notice? Oh yeah, that would be Jesus.

But Jesus is even saying that he, the Son of God, is not good. "No one is good but God alone." But Jesus, you're... Jesus! I read this as Jesus saying that without God, he is no better than anyone else. And the rich man who is viewed by the world as being "blessed by God" because how else would he be rich? He's no better either. In fact, this person who, by the world, has been labeled "blessed" is actually further behind in the game than anyone thought. Once again, with a single phrase Jesus is turning popular belief on its head.

So this rich man, he's a pretty decent guy, right? He's not your pompous rich man depicted in other parables, showing off his donation to the church or ignoring the widow and the blind man. He lives a pretty good and upstanding life. He follows the commandments, and has lived his life righteously. Then Jesus starts stirring the pot. First, it's, "Hey, you think

you're a good person, so confident about following all the commandments and living a good life? I'M not even good on my own, so you might want to get off your high horse." And then, Jesus takes him down yet another peg. "You know all those possessions you've worked so hard for and been blessed by God to have? Give it all away before you think you're getting into Heaven."

I think of the line from Spiderman: With great power comes great responsibility. I have the mental image of every dollar, every possession presenting another crossroads. Do we use these crossroads to bring ourselves, and the world, closer to God, or do we use them to just get ahead in life? For the rich, there's more crossroads, and more places to foul ourselves up.

I can picture the disciples and the crowd staring at Jesus as he said this. "Hold the phone! Now just hold on Jesus! The rich have been blessed by God to have such comfort in this life. And now you're saying they're not getting into Heaven?? If they're not getting into heaven, then who is??"

Jesus didn't even stop at rich people. "For mortals it is impossible." We, on our own, cannot get into heaven. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200. Your possessions, your power, your humbleness, your poverty, your piety, none of it is going to get you there on your own. But thankfully, Jesus didn't stop with that. "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

So wait, if God can do anything and everything, doesn't that mean he can make that camel fit through a needle with room to spare? Only by the grace of God.

And that brings me to the Hebrews reading, with God as a living and active being, sharper than any sword, divining the true heart of things. Jesus said the rich man had to give away his possessions to get into heaven. Do you think Jesus meant if he just gets rid of everything God would punch his one-way ticket to the pearly gates? In Hebrews it says that God is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no one is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare in the eyes of God.

Jesus was teaching a different way to relate to God and the world. He was teaching people to have a relationship with God, not a punch card system for life. That's why just following the Ten Commandments wasn't enough. And I don't think Jesus was giving the rich man another item to add to his checklist for his "Get Into Heaven Free" card. The question is WHY you give all your possessions away. Do you do it JUST to get into heaven? Sounds to me like a rather self-centered way of thinking... not too holy or Jesus-like.

Of course, then I run the risk of falling into the "why do anything if it makes no difference" argument. I've gotten into discussions over this scripture with non-Christians before, and one of the commonly recycled arguments is something along the lines of, "Well, if I can't get into heaven on my own, and God is going to do what God is going to do, then why should I try? There's no way for me to be perfect, so I might as well just do what I want, and at the

end of things, if I say, 'oh I'm sorry' then I'll get into heaven or not. Why work so hard to be good if it makes no difference in the end?"

But it does make a difference. We, as Christians, are called to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to do our best to live as he did. Jesus lived his life demonstrating a new world order, where the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Not because of what we eventually get, but because it is the way we have been asked to live.

Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus is a man, our "high priest", who lived a human life. The human part of Jesus is able to sympathize with and relate to our weaknesses. Jesus walked the road of hardships and persecution, all the way up to Calvary where he cried out his doubts and fears. I would argue the crucifixion to be one of the most "human" moments of Jesus' life. Here he is, yelling at God from the depths of his despair, accusing God of turning away and not recognizing his pain, distress and sorrow. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Jesus was offered everything during his walk on Earth. The Devil tempted him with earthly riches beyond the wildest dreams. He could have turned away from his ministry and had safety and security. Instead, he experienced life as what was considered by society to be the lowest of low, a man of no earthly reputation. He preached faith and forgiveness to a world quick to respond with aggression and condemnation. Jesus has been there and done that, and did it all without sin. And because Jesus *has* already done it, we can stand tall requesting grace and mercy in our times of need, knowing that he understands.

And now I come back to the beginning: How does all this relate to our stewardship drive, urging us to, “Think Greater”? Jesus told the rich man to give everything he had to the poor. If we take it at surface value, we are being told to give everything away just to wait for our reward in heaven. If we’re going to think greater, we’ve got to think of what we’re being asked to do beyond the bare minimum. This is why we’re taking a look at the ministries of the church, and the missions we are involved in, in our community and across the globe. If we’re really going to “Think Greater”, getting another tick on the checklist just can’t be enough.

In the book [The Gospel of Inclusion](#), Carlton Pearson described an epiphany of faith he had. He was watching the evening news report on a story about Rwanda and the horrible famine, persecution, and genocide there. He railed at God for allowing people to live and die in such atrocious conditions, horrified that God wasn’t taking better care of them, and that God would allow them to live in such misery without being saved. When a voice said, “Well, why don’t you do something about it?” his response was “I can’t save this whole world!”

“Precisely,” the voice responded. “We’re not sucking those dear people into hell. Can’t you see they’re already there? We’re bringing them into heaven before they suffer even more in the hell you have created for them and continue to create for yourselves and others all over the planet.”

What are we doing with our money, our time, and our journey through life with Christ? Are we so focused on what we don't have that we lose sight of all we do? Are we so focused on what we do have that we lose sight of what might be? Are we so focused on what is to come in the hereafter that we've lost sight of the needs of those that are right in front of us? Do our actions condemn others to live a life in Hell, or do we, through our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness, our very walk in life with God, help to show Jesus's way of living to a world in need?

Think Greater. If all things are possible for God, then there's nothing that cannot be, through the grace of God. What will you do, this very day and every single day to come, to bring the kingdom of Heaven to Earth?