

On this 21st Sunday after Pentecost, we find ourselves in a nation of great wealth, in fact, we are the world's richest economy, ahead of China by 10 trillion dollars.

And yet, “Economic inequality, to cite only the most important measure of social health, has accelerated dramatically in the U.S. since the early 1980s. One percent of the U.S. population holds around 35 percent of the nation's wealth;
the top 5 percent hold around 70 percent of the wealth;
and the bottom 50 percent hold 2 percent of the wealth.

The share of America's income held by the top 1 percent of the population has more than doubled since 1980, while the bottom 90 percent has, since 1975, coped with flat wages and mounting debt.”¹

Further, you can argue that the rich are destroying our planet.

The richest 10 percent are responsible for over 40 percent of all global greenhouse gas emissions, and the wealthiest 1 percent contribute more than twice as much carbon dioxide as the poorer half of the world.

These ideologies of the wealthy through political and economic influence, become the world ideologies,²

But the question remains, who is rich? What is the line that separates the “rich” from the “not rich.” Are you rich? Am I rich?

The main character in our passage from Mark 10 this morning “has many possessions.” Likely you’ve heard this biblical character described as the “Rich, Young Ruler.” In Matthew, he’s called “rich,” and in Luke, he’s called a “ruler,” but here, the only details Mark provides is that “he had many possessions” which is telling because it puts the emphasis squarely on his “stuff,” not his age or privileged status.

As a man of many possessions, he would seem to have what he needed, but something inside him, something dissatisfied in some way, thinks there might be something

¹ One percent of the U.S. population holds between 34 and 39 percent of the nation's wealth; the top 5 percent hold between 66 and 72 percent of the wealth; and the bottom 50 percent hold 2 percent of the wealth. The share of America's income held by the top 1 percent of the population has more than doubled since 1980, while the bottom 90 percent has, since 1975, coped with flat wages and mounting debt. - [Gary Dorrien](#)

² Clint Schnekloth

lacking, and he thinks that Jesus might know the answer. “Jesus, what must I do to inherit eternal life.”

It’s important to note here that eternal life isn’t simply life after death, but rather, eternal life is a quality of life that we can experience now that lasts into eternity. What must I do to inherit the Kingdom of God? What must I do to have a fulfilling life? What must I do to flourish as a human being?

So Jesus answers his excellent question, and he does so in two parts. In the first part of his answer, Jesus tells the man of many possessions that he should observe the commandments, and he quotes six of the 10 Commandments.

Specifically, he names the commands from the **second table**. You may know that the 10 commandments are divided up into two “tables” or you might think of Moses holding two “tablets.” In the first tablet, or table, are the duties to God: have no other gods before God, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, keep the Lord’s day holy. The second table contains the way we treat our fellow human beings, the ones Jesus quotes:

- Don’t murder;
- Don’t commit adultery;
- Don’t steal;
- You shall not bear false witness;
- You shall not defraud;
- Honor your father and mother.

I’m struck by an interesting thing Jesus does in quoting the second table of the 10 commandments. Instead of the language of covet, Jesus says “don’t defraud.” As a rabbi, he would normally quote verbatim, but here he interprets a bit, expands a bit, and sets the stage for the instructions he is about to give. The Commandment technically says to not “covet,” don’t desire what you don’t have--your neighbor’s spouse, home, possessions. But Jesus says don’t defraud. That is, don’t take something that’s not yours. It’s not exactly “stealing.” It’s not exactly “bearing false witness.” It’s ill-gotten gain.

Perhaps he’s suggesting that the man’s wealth may have come through some shady dealing that took advantage of others?

Might Jesus here be saying the same thing as the prophet Amos? The lectionary committee who put these two texts together at least thinks it's a possibility.

Amos was a herdsman by profession and a prophet by God’s call. In the face of great prosperity in [the northern kingdom of] Israel, the prophet condemns the

wealthy upper class leaders of Israel for their abuse of the poor. God demands justice, says Amos.

Amos-style justice had a special focus on the city gate (Amos 5:10, 12, 15). The city “gate” was the area just inside the main entrance to the walled city, a public gathering place for all kinds of hearings and disputes (Ruth 4:1, 10–11). God was very interested in what happened “in the gate” because it was the key public arena for negotiating fairness, compassion, and social order in accord with the values, nature and history of God and God’s people.³

The result of Jesus naming the commandments is that the man of many possessions, with great satisfaction, says that he’s done all these for his whole life! Jesus appears to concur, and then adds one last requirement: Sell all your many possessions, and give the money to the poor, and come and follow me. And the man’s countenance drops, and he goes away grieving.

Now I have to wonder, what if the man of many possessions at least tried a little bit? What if he said, “Everything, Jesus? What about a tithe? What if I gave away 10 percent?”

How would Jesus respond? “Nope. You gotta give it all away.”

Or would Jesus have said, 10%? That’s a good start. That will help you get to 20%. Maybe that will help you keep going in your generosity, in your care for justice, and your care for the poor.” But the man with many possessions says, “Nope, not going to do it.”

All of this messes with the disciples. Wait a minute, Jesus, aren’t the rich blessed by God? The disciples think so. They haven’t gotten the message from Jesus yet where he says it’s the children, those without status, wealth, and privilege, who inherit the kingdom of God.

Then comes the famous saying that it’s **easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God**. For centuries the church has tried to soften these words of Jesus. Maybe you’ve heard the interpretation that there was a small gate into the city of Jerusalem that a loaded-down camel could just barely get through if it got on its knees to squeeze through the gate with great difficulty. However, there is no such gate; some commentators in the 9th c. just made it up to soften the words of Jesus.

Some have suggested that there was a typo: the Hebrew for camel, with a couple of letters transposed, could be the word for rope. I guess a rope going through the eye of a needle is a little more plausible, but, it’s still near impossible. It would take a giant needle!

³ [Dennis Olson](#) in “Working Preacher.”

No, Jesus is engaging in his frequent hyperbole: it's impossible for an actual camel to go through an actual eye of the needle. Riches are prohibitive when it comes to the Kingdom of God. The disciples are flummoxed and ask Jesus if anyone can be saved.

And then comes the “**get out jail free**” line from Jesus to the perplexed disciples: yes, it may seem impossible,
but with God, Jesus says, **all things are possible**.

Want to inherit eternal life? Inherit a quality of life that is better and starts now? Then, Jesus says, use your resources to help those with less, love your neighbor in need as you love yourself. God will take care of the rest.

One last thing. What about this: the word “inherit” that the man of many possessions uses. “Inheriting” is not about something you do, or earn, it's about who you are. Inheritance comes by virtue of whose family you belong to.

But in God's economy, it isn't about earning, or doing, or achieving, it's about grace. Maybe **there is such a thing as a free lunch**. As a child of God, who bears the image of God, the Kingdom of God *is* your inheritance.

What can you do to inherit eternal life? Inherit the Kingdom of God? Inherit a life of human flourishing. **Nothing**. It's already given by God. You are a child of God, you, therefore, are an inheritor of the Kingdom of God, an inheritor of eternal life. The question is, are you aware of it? And what is your response to God acting first? Gratitude and Grace to others? Because that's the response God asks us of us, to respond to the Grace God freely gives by caring for others.

So dear friends, know today that it's all grace. It's all from God. Because of God's grace, we are freed to do God's work. Thanks be to God.

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Yes, there is still the problem of having too much stuff. It keeps us from realizing our need for God because we use it as a buffer against vulnerability. We use it to fill the emptiness in our souls. We use it to feel less susceptible to the vagaries of life. It keeps us from seeing how needy we are. –*Stacey Simpson*.

The text remains troubling . . . Lamar Williamson puts it this way:

After we have done our best to make this text say something less upsetting to our system of values, Jesus looks intently at us (loves us) and continues quietly to affirm that life is to be had not by accumulating things, but by

disencumbering ourselves. Contrary to the dominant voices of our culture, but in keeping with the entire section on discipleship in Mark, this text proclaims the good news that the way to be really rich is to die to wealth.

If this message doesn't take our breath away, if we are not shocked, appalled, grieved, or amazed, we have either not heard it or heard it so often that we don't really hear it anymore.

May we hold in tension the fact that "with God all things are possible,"
that we "inherit" the gift of grace from God,
and that God calls us to work for justice in the gate.

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*