

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

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# **THE GOOD NEWS: Living in a Material World**

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**Living in a**  
**Material World**

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### Introduction

This morning, we will return to the Gospel of Mark and join Jesus back on the road with his disciples. Jesus has, at this point, turned his attention and path toward Jerusalem. But Jesus pauses several times on his way. Our text picks up right after a story of people bringing children to him—perhaps sick children, perhaps those whose families just hoped for a blessing, assurance that God would be with them. The disciples are indignant that people would waste Jesus' time with children. But Jesus welcomes the kids and blesses them and tells his disciples that whoever does not receive God's Kingdom like a little child, will not enter it.

Our passage today features a vastly different protagonist who comes to Jesus, but a similar message of what it looks like to enter God's upside-down kingdom.

Let us pray:

God of goodness and love,

We so easily forget that every new day, every breath, every meal, every drink, every plant and animal and star, is a gift from you.

Let your word today be a gift that draws us closer to you, to your will for us, and to all people by your love.

Help us to see your Kingdom more clearly, and to follow Christ more boldly. Amen.

## Scripture

### Mark 10:17-31

<sup>17</sup> As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>18</sup> Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. <sup>19</sup> You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’ ” <sup>20</sup> He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” <sup>21</sup> Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

<sup>23</sup> Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” <sup>24</sup> And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” <sup>26</sup> They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” <sup>27</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

<sup>28</sup> Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no

one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news <sup>30</sup> who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. <sup>31</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

### **The Gospel of Marie Kondo**

Some people have yo-yo diets—where they are consistently on and off one eating program or another. Some are like this with exercise or with daily devotions or journaling. I am a yo-yo minimalist. I love a good tidying up show. I love a good purge of junk I do not need. I am anti-storage unit. I love asking, Marie Kondo-style, if objects spark joy.

But I also have a lot of shoes and jackets and books. I spend plenty on changing my hair and my glasses. I convince myself every few months that I will get outside more to run or hike or play pickleball if I just buy a new thing that will make it better and easier and cuter to do. My husband concurs with this confession.

I doubt I am the only one with a complicated, ambivalent relationship with stuff. Our stuff is connected to our identities, the way we display who we are to others. It's connected to our wellbeing and security, to our future hopes and present comfort. And our stuff can connect or disconnect us from our neighbors, from those with less or more.

God, the creator of all things, seems to be concerned about our things. Wealth, resources, and what the practices of God's people are when it comes to land, buildings, businesses, livestock, and the stuff they have are addressed throughout Scripture. Whether wisdom from Proverbs, words of conviction and justice from the prophets, or Jesus' stark teachings on money and worry, abundance and poverty.

Jesus calls to us to follow him with all of who we are—including our stuff.

### **Is This a Story of Healing?**

And so, we read, a man comes and kneels before Jesus, asking him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

This is not a gotcha question from this man. He is not seeking to trap Jesus or reveal something about Jesus to spark the irritation of others. This man is earnest, maybe anxious. He kneels, like those who have humbly come to Jesus, desperate for healing. He doesn't seem to know what ails him, but he needs reassurance that he has done what he needs to do to get the inheritance of eternal life that he has worked for.

Jesus, first reminds him that only God is good—perhaps to orient the man to reality, he isn't earning his way with God or perhaps to see if this man truly understands who he is talking to, God made flesh right in front of him—either way, Jesus reminds him of only God's goodness, and then lists off the



commandments that concern our treatment of others. Yes, the man has done all these. Is he in the clear?

Jesus looks at him and loves him. Mark does not say this about anyone anywhere else. Jesus has looked with compassion, yes, but this man, Jesus agapes him—the kind of love God has for God’s children. Jesus sees in him the child who could come easily running into the Kingdom of God, like the children who had run to come to Jesus for blessing and for healing, with no pretense of earning it. But the man is not a child. He is an adult, one we will soon find out, who has many possessions.

Jesus tells him that, even though he has followed the commandments, he lacks one thing. “Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come follow me.”

This is not what the man expected. And it not what Jesus asked of everyone. Some did leave everything to follow—Peter points that out quickly—but it doesn’t seem like the proceeds went to the poor. Judas at one point lectures Jesus about the waste of oil being poured on him instead of selling it and giving it to the poor. The crowds were not called to give up what they had to follow. There were tax collectors, who were convicted by Christ’s grace and chose to give back several-fold what they had defrauded to obtain. Yet, those who had not defrauded were not called to give what they had to the poor.

But Jesus saw this man clearly. He looked at him through the eyes of God's love and saw that something ailed him. Something obscured his vision of God's Kingdom. Something stood as an obstacle on the path to following Jesus.

It is within the original question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? The man sought to earn his way to life with God.

Jesus called him to see the Kingdom at hand, embodied in the person of Jesus in front of him, being lived out along this journey to Jerusalem. It's like Jesus saying: You've tried to earn it. You've checked the boxes. But you're still anxious and unsure. What you lack is living it. What must you do to inherit eternal life? Live it! Now...God looks at you as a child God loves. You have your inheritance. It is grace. It is the family of God. It is love. It is God's provision. It is justice. It is the upside-down kingdom that you can join in right now.

Go, give what you have for the sake of the poor then follow me.

### **Living in a Material World**

The particular call leads to a general teaching as Jesus turns to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" This was the opposite of common sense at the time. For a righteous person, a person who sought to follow the commandments, to be wealthy was a sign of God's favor. This rich man was the epitome of this—he sought God and God had blessed him.

But Jesus turns common sense on its head and offers Gospel wisdom instead: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God...for mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

It is not our righteousness nor our wealth; it is not our goodness nor our success that earns us a spot in God’s Kingdom. *Just as we did not earn our spot on earth; just as we do not earn our next breath; life in the world to come is a gift.*

The question is not how do I inherit heaven? It is, how do respond to the gift of life now? It’s not about fighting for a spot in the Kingdom to come, but about recognizing and joining God’s Kingdom here.

This is why material things matter so much. This world and this life matter to God. Our things, our money, the work of our hands, the places we show up embodied with our labor—those matter to God.

Jesus does not call us away from the material world. He calls us to examine it. To recognize all we have as a gift and to use it to be part of the Kingdom God is building, the kingdom that will remain for eternity.

When left unexamined or, worse, in control of our lives, our wealth and possessions are roadblocks to following the way of

Christ. We may find ourselves walking away from Jesus' call in grief.

But there is good news. The good news that remained in the air as an invitation to this man, even as he walked away in the moment. It is good news that Jesus continues to extend to us, even if we have walked away in the past.

The good news is this: When we unclench of our fists and live with open hands, understanding our lives as gifts received not possession earned, we may find brothers and sisters all around us, mothers and fathers in the faith who can guide us, houses of hospitality where we find belonging, children who we can pour into, and abundant land that can provide for all of us, not just some. Jesus warns, too, of persecution because this family, this upside-down Kingdom is a threat to power and privilege and wealth, as much as it is an invitation to full life.

### **How Do We Hold What We Have?**

Jesus' particular call to this man may not be the call he has on you, but he is calling each of us. God calls us—the whole of who we are as God's beloved children, including the things we possess and that may possess us.

How do you respond to the gift of life now? How do you, with all of who you are and all of what you have, join in God's Kingdom?

Let me tell you about Rachel. Rachel is a woman who lived in Lawrenceville. She bought a row house when Lawrenceville was a more affordable place to live than it is today. A house is one of the greatest assets a person can have in our cultural imagination and economic reality. And her house kept gaining in value. She didn't do any dramatic work on it, just general upkeep. But the place where she lived became more and more desirable. She saw her neighborhood changing—it was a mixed bag of change, but what concerned her was that the folks she had gotten to know in her neighborhood were almost entirely people who would not have been able to live there if they were searching for a home now.

There came a time when she needed to move, and she understood what a gift her home was— as an asset, yes, but more as a place of shelter, community, a place of peace. She didn't want to exploit the gift when she moved, she wanted to share it. So, she intentionally sought out an organization— that my husband happened to lead at the time— that she could work with to make her house affordable for the next person or family, and the one after that, and the one after that. She did not give away her home and all her possessions, but she held it loosely to be used for the common good, rather than just her benefit. She made enough to move to where she wanted, but not to build up riches from something that had been for her a gift.

I know churches that have worked through similar processes with their buildings, decided to let them go if financing them

got in the way of mission. I know of people who have given their spare cars to refugee families. Folks who open their homes to international students as they study at nearby colleges. Those who host Thanksgiving dinner for neighbors that are alone. Moms' groups where clothes, bottles, Mamaroos, things that quickly add up in cost are shared.

### **It Is Good News**

God cares about this material world. God created it. Jesus is not calling each person to let go of all material possessions to follow him. Things are not counter to God's Kingdom. But how we hold what we have—how we view our money, our homes, our assets, and resources—must be like how we view our goodness, our righteousness. It is not about we have earned and what God owes to us. Our little kingdoms are not God's. And if we want to enter God's Kingdom, we have to accept that it—like our very life—is a gift.

And that is good news. Because it is a gift from a good God who looks at us with love. We can loosen our grip, and respond to God's call to follow him, even with our stuff, with joy. Amen.





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