

*“Ultimate Concern”*  
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*<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.”*

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Let me begin my sermon this morning with a bit of honesty: very few people like this morning’s lectionary text from Mark’s gospel. Preachers don’t like it because it’s really difficult to preach on without ticking people off. Congregants don’t like it

because it's really easy to hear a sermon on this text and end up getting ticked off. I have a suspicion that this is one of the few times in the New Testament where Jesus says exactly what he means: no confusing parables, cryptic language, or multiple meanings. Preachers love confusing parables, cryptic language, and multiple meanings! They give us an out when the text is tough. Not today.

A man approaches Jesus with a single question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life." Jesus tells him to follow the law. The man admits that he has always followed the law. Jesus looks at the man with love and tells him to sell all that he has, give the money to the poor, and become his disciple. The man walks away sad, because he had many possessions.

Let's be honest again: I suspect that most of us don't like this text because it scares us a bit and leaves us wondering if Jesus expects this of us—if the cost of being Jesus' disciple is really so high. Afraid of asking too much of their congregations, preachers feel an unmistakable urge to soften the demands of this text. That urge has been around for a long time.

- All the way back in the ninth century, an interpreter made up the idea of a low gate into Jerusalem called "the eye of the needle," through which camels could pass only if stooped and unladen. Presumably, then, Jesus criticizes only the proud rich, or only the rich who are not extremely determined to enter the kingdom. Unfortunately, no such gate ever existed.
- Countless preachers have suggested that Jesus just knew that wealth was this particular man's special "weak spot," and so he zeroed in on it only to expose the man's distinctive shortcoming. This gives us permission to assume that Jesus would not ask us to part with our possessions, just those things that we *really* do not want to give up—only our aggressive driving or fried foods, for example.
- Other preachers assert that Jesus only tests the man by issuing a demand meant to expose his arrogant piety—of claiming to keep the law since his youth. But such an interpretation makes a mockery of Jesus' love for the man and of the man's grief.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Skinner. "Commentary on Mark 10:17-31," Workingpreacher.org, October 11, 2009, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=402](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=402).

Preachers do all sorts of interpretive gymnastics to try and get around Jesus' radically unwelcome message to this sad, young, rich guy. Ernesto Tinajero once said that "If you read the Bible and it does not challenge you, then you are reading yourself and not the Bible." Today, we're reading the Bible—a tough text—but it's still the Bible. "Wanna see the kingdom?" Jesus asks the man. "Sell your stuff, give away the money, and follow me." I honestly think Jesus meant what he said.

To understand this story and what it may be asking of us, however, let's consider the rich young man a little more. How many of us have ever found ourselves in his shoes—falling at the feet of a teacher or guru or self-help book, or looking for religion or relationship or volunteer opportunities because, even though we seem to have it together, it feels like something is missing? You don't have to raise your hands, but I've been there and I'm guessing many of you have too. Something was missing in this guy. He still felt empty. He was a good person. He was a religious person. And life had dealt him a good hand. But something was missing. And, according to our text, Jesus loved him. That's why Jesus told him what he did—to sell what he had, give to the poor, and follow Jesus—it was out of love.

A wise person once said, "Make sure that what you give your heart to, is worthy of it."<sup>2</sup> Jesus knew that something was missing, but could never be found as long as the rich young man's heart belonged to his wealth. Jesus wanted more for him than that. Jesus wanted more for *everyone* than that.

You see, for three years Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was in the world. He healed the sick to bring people into it. He taught forgiveness to bring people into it. He brought life from death to bring people into it. He fed crowds to bring people into it. He challenged injustice to bring people into it. He taught love of neighbor and turning the other cheek to bring people into it. Everything Jesus did was to bring people into the reality he was so convinced was being born in the world at that very moment—the kingdom of God—the realm of heaven on earth, of peace and justice, love and forgiveness, mutuality, plenty, and care.

This rich young man didn't need healing or feeding or moral instruction to see the kingdom and catch Jesus' dream. He needed to let go of his attachment to money. He needed to shift his ultimate concern from coin of the realm to kingdom of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Matthews. Ucc.org, October 14, 2018, [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_october\\_14\\_2018](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_october_14_2018).

Only then, would the rich young man find what was missing in his life. Only then, could he participate in the wondrous realm of heaven being realized in his very midst. Only then would he be whole.

Now, I'll ask again: how many of us find ourselves in this young man's shoes—falling at the feet of a teacher or guru or self-help book, or looking for religion or relationship or volunteer opportunities because, even though we seem to have it together, it feels like something is missing? Could there be something that's getting in the way of us seeing the kingdom of God in *our* midst and catching Jesus' dream for the world? Is an attachment to wealth or work or life circumstance keeping us from finding the missing piece in our lives—from true wholeness as children of God and modern-day disciples of Jesus?

Philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich believed that faith was a matter of ultimate concern. He asserted that anything that achieves ultimate concern in a person's life is elevated to the status of a god for that person. This is, of course, fine and good unless the thing that achieves ultimate concern for someone is wealth, or nation, or success, or...you fill in the blank. For Tillich, it was the matter of ultimate concern, that ultimately determined the course of one's life. The ultimate concern, in today's story of the rich young man, was wealth. That's what Jesus was pointing out when he told the man to reorient his priorities by selling his possessions, giving to the poor, and following him. Wealth is what stood in the way of the rich young man and true wholeness.

So today, I invite us to ponder two questions. Firstly, what is *our* ultimate concern? And secondly, should it be?

A wise person once said, "Make sure that what you give your heart to, is worthy of it."<sup>3</sup> May it be so with us. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.