

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As he 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?" ¹⁸Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You 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.'" ²⁰He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹Jesus, 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." ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It 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." ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

²⁸Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹Jesus 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, ³⁰who 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. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

For today's Gospel lesson, we have the acted parable of the Rich Young Man.

"Good Teacher," He asks, "what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" It's apparent that the man, you see, considers himself a success as far as the world is concerned. He has conquered the physical and earthly world and is now ready to try to win Something Better for himself, some spiritual prize that he can take home. But he cannot for the life of him imagine pursuing that Spiritual Something by any other means than still more winning. He is certain that there must techniques for making a spiritual profit just as there were for making a temporal one, and he has come to Jesus to study them.

Jesus, however, has his number, and sees him for what he is. "What's with all this talk about good?" He asks him, "Nobody's good, and nobody's going to be. Maybe I'm good; but my goodness looks so much like badness that people can't even stand the thought of it. And God, of course, really is good, but not in any way you can hope to imitate. So just knock off this goodness routine and listen to what I'm trying to tell you." After Jesus tells the young man that

goodness eludes us all, he challenges him to take an honest look at how successful he's actually been at practicing the goodness he thinks is the answer to his problems. He wants him to see that the law can save no one because the law can actually be kept by no one. So he hands the rich young man a straight line: "Hey! You know the commandments: 'Don't kill; Don't commit adultery; Don't steal; Don't bear false witness; Don't defraud; Honour your father and your mother.' Why don't you take a really good look at them?" And he is supposed to respond with something like, "Oh, I get you: I haven't really been a success at even those things, so why should I run around looking for even more good things I can be a failure at?"

Unfortunately, he is so wrapped up in himself that he can't even conceive of not being successful, so he cuts Jesus off with, "Oh Teacher, I've done all those things perfectly ever since I was a kid. Why don't you give me a really hard grown-up assignment?" But then, as Mark says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." But he thinks to himself, you poor amiable sap, I like you a lot, more than you'll ever know. But it just doesn't work that way. You try to save your life like that, you'll only lose it. You have to lose, l-o-s-e, lose your life to save it. Still, I'll give you a shot at what I mean, just to prove I love you.

So with consummate understatement, Jesus gently breaks the Good News to him. "You only have to do one simple little thing: sell everything you have and give it to the poor. That will take care of getting your treasury of merits off your back. Then come and follow me to my death." And at that saying, Mark says, , the young man got very gloomy in the face and went off in a deep depression because "he had great possessions" — because, that is, he just couldn't bear the thought of being unsuccessful, of joining the losers.

The saddest part of the whole thing, though, is that he turned his back on the only really good piece of news he would ever hear, because in something under threescore years and ten, all that great stuff of his — all those many goods worldly or spiritual, physical or intellectual — would be taken from him anyway. And so would all his terrible stuff as well: the whole pile of his unacknowledged failures, the ratty tissue of his irretrievable relationships and second-rate loves. All of his achievements — his successful virtues as well as his success-loving vices — would someday go whistling into the ultimate no-win situation, the final redeeming unsuccess of death. And the next saddest part of it is that in spite of this acted parable of the rich young man — in spite of Jesus' clear insistence that no winner will ever do anything but lose — you and I go right on blithely trying to win. If it is not financial success that keeps us from the saving emptiness of Jesus on the cross, it is moral

success, intellectual success, emotional success, or spiritual success. We simply will not lose; and without losing we will never, ever, win.

Jesus continues with what sounds at first like a tightening of the law to keep everyone out of the kingdom: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. 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.” Someone who has a successful life will not consent to the radical slimming down that Jesus, the Needle of God, calls for if he is to pull them through into the kingdom. Jesus the Needle is willing to sew up the salvation of every last Son of Adam and every last Daughter of Eve by threading them into the eye of his death — into the spear-wound in his side, if you will — just as Jesus the Divine Vacuum Cleaner will suck everyone who isn’t obsessed with the wide gate of success right smack into the kingdom through the narrow slot of his failure on the cross. All we have to do is let go — let go of everything that is not the slim thread of our being last and lost, and let go of every effort to walk the easy road of success — and upon that letting go he will draw us home.

The sentence that Jesus pronounces is more loving than condemning, it is sadder than it is stern. “Oh damn!” Jesus says, stamping a lover’s furious foot: “Why won’t you come? Why won’t you let me draw you? Why do you insist on loving the darkness when you are already standing in the light? How can you not know the things that belong to your peace?”

You see, Hell is the destination of overloaded camels and fatheaded finders of the wide road of success. Hell is as real as it is unnecessary and as eternal, so it seems, as the Love that will not let go even of those who won’t stop hanging on to the successes that are destroying them. It is the perpetual Mexican standoff between the Loser who has won it all and the Winners who cannot stand the thought of losing. It is, in short, hell.

The disciples are no more ready to think about such things than the rest of us are. “They were exceedingly astonished,” the Gospel says and they say to Jesus, “Then who can be saved?” But then Mark adds, “Jesus looked at them.”

I think that at this point Jesus hints for the first time that he is beginning to realize that what he is asking of the world is simply too much — that it really is an impossible invitation and he says to the disciples, resignedly; “You’re right. For mortals this is impossible.” Grace, he realises, is the last thing the world will buy.

But grace, Jesus also realises, is the only thing that will work on the world as it so sadly is. “An eye for an eye” won’t work because all it does is double the number of eyeless people. Retribution won’t take evil out of the world; it will

simply perpetuate it in spades. A judgement that works only by punishing sinners and rewarding the righteous produces all hell and no kingdom: there are just too many sinners, and there are no righteous. The only thing that's going to get evil out of the world is for him to take it to himself on the cross — to drop it down the black hole of his death — and to make a new creation by the power of his resurrection. That's why he adds, "but with God all things are possible" — even the impossibility of grace.

But we all know that grace doesn't sell; you can hardly give it away, because it only works for losers, and no one wants to associate with that crowd. We will all buy case lots of moral advice, tons of self improvement techniques, and whole truckloads of transcendental hot air. But we will not buy free forgiveness because that threatens to let the riffraff into the Supper of the Lamb. And yet Jesus insists that that is the inescapable judgement that Mercy pronounces on a world that won't even put mercy on the bottom of its list.