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An Absolute Claim

Mark 10:17-34

Yesterday, as I was brainstorming for an introduction for this sermon, the perfect article popped up in my news feed. The *Washington Post* published an article with the headline, "Trump retains assets worth at least \$1.4 billion, new disclosure shows." The article alleges that even though he is now in the White House, the president has not divested himself of 1.4 billion dollars' worth of real estate assets, despite what some people think were promises during his campaign that he would do so. It further says (quote) "Trump has made his wealth a key element of his political brand, and his refusal to relinquish ownership of his company has spurred ethics complaints and legal challenges." Now, either you think that these complaints are legitimate, or you see this as part of the media's eternal campaign to undermine the president. Either way I'm not here to make a political statement. I'm sure that you get enough of politics Monday through Friday to more than make up for what you might not get on Sunday. The president may have completely legitimate reasons for holding on to his wealth. But my point is that in our passage this morning, Jesus encounters a man who is also unwilling to relinquish his wealth, though for completely different reasons. And it's a passage that we all – rich, poor, middle class, need to hear.

So, who is this man who runs up to Jesus? Well, one thing we learn about him in verse 22 is what I've already mentioned, he had great wealth. Both the gospels of Matthew and Luke also recount this story, and they each add the details that he is young, and that he is a ruler of some kind. And this is why, if you're familiar with this story, you've probably heard him referred to as the rich young ruler.

But none of these accounts tell us how he came by his wealth or power. Either he inherited it through his family, or he had attained it on his own. But either way, it's clear that he had made it – by all standards of the world. He had it all. He had money, he had power, and on top of all of that – he was still young. What could be better?

But there's one more thing we learn about him; and we learn this not from any description, but from his actions. And that is that in all his wealth, youth and power, he doesn't seem to be fully satisfied. Verse 17 says that he ran up to Jesus and fell at his knees. It's an act of desperation; maybe even exasperation. But the kicker that gives away his dissatisfaction is the question he poses to Jesus. "Good teacher," he says, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

It's a good question, isn't it? It might be the only question that really matters; the only ultimate and serious question in the world. How do I live with God forever? It is a good question, and one that we all should ask.

But there might be more to it, more behind his question than we first realize. It's the way that he asks the question, it's the way in how he addresses Jesus, and it's the way in how he reacts to Jesus' answer, that reveals that he is not prepared for what Jesus would have him do. It reveals that he isn't looking for an answer that would require an absolute claim on his life. It reveals that he is more interested in a nugget of wisdom, a bit of self-help advice that would finally make him feel completely fulfilled. He had the money, he had the power, and as we'll see, he thought he had the morality. Now all he needs is this one little thing from Jesus to seal the deal. Then he'll really have it made.

So immediately, Jesus challenged his desire for self-help advice. "Why do you call me good?" he asks. "There is no one good but God." "If all you want from me is advice, a nugget of wisdom from which you can pick and choose what you think might help you, and discard the rest; if that's all you want from me, then why do you call me good? If I am just a wise teacher to you, but not worthy of your full devotion, why would you refer to me with a term that should only be used for God?"

It will not do for this rich young man to view Jesus as just a "good teacher." No, he is God in the flesh; and since he is God, he is worthy to stake a rightful and absolute claim on this man's life.

So, what is the absolute claim that Jesus places on this rich young ruler? First he directs him to the Law and Commandments. Verse 19: "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.'" Jesus, in effect, says follow the commandments, and you will live.

What is Jesus doing here? Is he preaching a salvation of works? No, I don't think he is. I think what Jesus is doing here is actually an act of grace towards this man. He references the Law to give the man an opportunity to recognize his deficiency in obeying the Law.

After all, isn't that one of the primary purposes of the Law? John 1 refers to the Law given through Moses as "grace already given." And as Pastor Kynes preached last week, the Law is gracious. It's gracious because when we obey it, things go better for us. But it is also gracious because when we evaluate our conduct according to its standards, we find ourselves completely lacking – in need of something outside of the Law to save us. And that is meant to direct us to Jesus – whose perfect obedience to the Law for us gives us true salvation. Jesus graciously desires that this man will acknowledge his deficiency, and look to Jesus for the answer to his question.

But this man isn't willing to go there, as we see in verse 9. "All these I have kept since I was a boy." By adopting his own standards for compliance to the law, he has already justified himself. Sure, he was probably a very moral man, and I'm sure that his friends thought he was too. But in the words of actor Will Rogers, "It's not what he doesn't know that worries me. It's what he knows for sure that just ain't so." Because there is a world of difference between outward obedience of the Law and inward spiritual obedience. And Jesus knows his heart. And in this man's self-deception, he is not interested in placing his faith, his trust, in Jesus. He only wants another command, or even better, a quick fix – just a bit of advice to solve his dilemma of eternity. He reveals himself to be like someone who goes to the doctor with dangerously high blood pressure, but refuses to follow the doctor's direction to lose weight. "Just give me the pills that will make this problem go away," he says.

But Jesus knows that there is no such miracle drug – there is no "10 Steps to a Better Life" program that will save him. So he says to him in verse 21: "One thing you lack. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." And we read, "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth."

It's a sad story, isn't it? This young man who had it all – wealth, power, prestige – but who recognized that he was still missing something; this man comes face to face with the one person in the world who is able to fulfill his deepest need. But he can't take the necessary step that will enable him to receive Jesus' gift.

Why does Jesus command him to rid himself of his wealth? Why doesn't he just give him what he wants? As we've already seen, this man wasn't looking for a life-altering command. He had the wealth, he had the power, he had the morality, and the respect of everyone around him. Now all he needed was a cherry on top, the icing on the cake. He wanted some bit of wisdom that would make it all complete. He had his inheritance on earth, but now he wanted to supplement it with an inheritance in heaven.

But Jesus shows him that in order for him to gain his heavenly inheritance, he has to abandon his earthly one. He has to take an extraordinarily hard step of obedience to get it. And the reason Jesus demands this is that this man's wealth had become his chief object. It was the source of his security, his respect in society. He probably thought that it helped him be a better person – it helped him better obey the Law by giving generously, but on his own terms. It gave him no reason to covet or steal. He may have thought that his wealth was a sign of God's blessing. In his mind, his money was the best thing he had going for him.

So Jesus had to create a situation in which his command to follow him was in no way a fulfillment of his past life. Following Jesus wasn't going to be the icing on the cake of his life. It

wasn't just going to be that one last thing that brought all the wealth and power together, and gave it all a purpose. So Jesus tells him to embrace a life of voluntary poverty. Jesus would have him, but he would have all of him. He wouldn't share him with his wealth and all the things that came with it – his power, his respect in his community. No, turning to Jesus required that this man turn away from all of those other things that made up his identity. He had to take a step of obedience of faith before he could follow.

So it's important for us this morning to recognize that for this young man, it's not the act of selling all that he has and giving it to the poor that would have given him eternal life. No, Jesus tells him to sell, give, but then **follow**. That is where Jesus' emphasis is – "Come follow me." So then the selling and giving are merely a precondition to **following**. They are essential preliminary acts of obedience that must be performed before he can do the thing that will really save him. The selling and the giving have no power of themselves other than that they make the man free to **follow**. So for this man, following Jesus, discipleship, is the end – but self-induced poverty is the means. Ridding himself of his wealth is the path he must take in order to follow. That was the one thing he lacked.

So what is the one thing you lack? What preliminary act of obedience must you take in order to follow Jesus? Because it's an act of grace on his part to pose that question to you. You may be thinking, I live a modest middle class life. I don't have wealth, power, prestige. I'm not even young anymore. This man's obstacles are not my obstacles.

But is there something else in your life, something that's an essential part of your earthly identity, that is an obstacle to Jesus' absolute claim on your life? What step of obedience must you take to follow him? Friends, if we're honest, many of us who are Christians live in dramatic inconsistency with Jesus' call on our lives.

I'm reminded of the story of the 18th century slave trader turned Christian, John Newton. While serving on a slave ship, Newton developed hostile relationships with the rest of the crew. So they abandoned him in West Africa where he himself was pressed into slavery by a local African tribe. Three years later, he was rescued, and during his return to England, he came to faith in Jesus in the aftermath of a severe storm that nearly sank the ship. But something that we often don't mention when we talk about Newton's dramatic conversion is that he continued to work in the slave trade for the next six years; and he only gave it up after he suffered a stroke which physically prevented him from going to sea.

This is not the story of conversion that we'd like to hear. We'd like to hear that John Newton came to faith and immediately renounced the slave trade, never looking back. But that's not how it happened. In fact, it wasn't until 34 years later when Newton became active in the British abolitionist movement that he finally made (quote) "a confession which comes too late.

It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.” And in his auto biography he wrote about his conversion, “I cannot consider myself to have been a believer in the full sense of the word, until a considerable time afterwards.”

We are often a people of remarkable inconsistencies as Christians. Why else did the Apostle Paul have to write to the Christians in Ephesus to “put off the old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; and be made new in the attitude of your minds; and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Maybe you’re here this morning, and you profess to be a Christian, but you feel dead. And you don’t understand what all this talk about walking with Jesus really means. You haven’t experienced it. Well, what do you need to sell and give before you can follow? What essential preliminary act of obedience do you need to perform so that Jesus can really have preeminence in your life?

Maybe the first thing you need to do is to take a deliberate step to put yourself in the path of Jesus, so that you can’t miss him; to put your self in the stream of his revelation. You need to go here; to his word, and plead with him in prayer that you might encounter him there. Maybe you need to rid yourself of your self-pity – that sense of “Woe is me, God hasn’t made his love for me perfectly clear.” – that self-pity that until now you have placed as a barrier to your discipleship.

Because as we see with this rich man, it’s not enough to run up to Jesus in desperation and to kneel at his feet. It’s not enough to do that if you are unwilling to obey his command to rid yourself of the obstacle that is preventing a complete resignation to his absolute claim on your life.

Maybe, for others of you, that act of obedience is to finally commit yourself to the local church, and stop living on the fringe of the body of Christ where nobody knows you well enough to share life with you. Ephesians says that “Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her.” We didn’t establish the church. Jesus did – as a gift to us, for our good. So maybe you need to go through the membership process here, commit to the leaders as they commit to you. And maybe you need to join a community group, and be known. It is not good for your soul to be a homeless Christian.

Or maybe you need to rid yourself of some secret, habitual sin that is thriving in darkness. Maybe you need to bring it to light to another believer or one of the pastors here. There is nothing more deadly for you than to let it thrive. Expose it someone before it kills you, and receive the grace and forgiveness that Jesus came to give you. Maybe this is the time for you to

obey God's command in James, to "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed."

Christians, though you may not be rich, do not miss this opportunity to evaluate what you must do before you can follow. None of these things will alone save you. Only following Jesus can do that. But a failure to obey in these matters can kill you, because they can subvert Jesus' command for you to follow him with undivided devotion.

But as we'll see next in our passage, if you try to take this step of obedience on your own, out of sheer willpower, you will fail. After our rich man leaves, we read in verse 23,

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!' The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, '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.' The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

I think Jesus makes three clear points here. First, it is particularly hard for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. And this makes sense. If following Jesus requires that we first turn away from other things, than those who have much, those who have a lot of money or other material things have more to turn away from. They have more to let go than others. Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." And he's right, isn't he? Money has real power over us. It determines where we can live and where we can't, what kind of vacations we can take, or if we can take them at all. We let it determine how many kids we can have. It keeps us checking our investment portfolios, as if it's some kind of daily devotion. In the words of a popular 90's hit song, "It's a bittersweet symphony, this life. Try to make ends meet, you're a slave to money then you die." The more money we have, the more attention we tend to give to it. We talk about achieving "financial independence" implying that if we just had enough money then we wouldn't worry about it anymore. But in fact the opposite is true. I'm ashamed to think about how much I really do think about my money, and I'm just an intern.

So I think what Jesus is saying here rings true in our human experience. The more money we have, the more devotion we tend to give to it, and consequently the less devotion we give to God. Jesus uses the analogy of a camel going through the eye of a needle to describe the difficulty of the rich entering the kingdom of God. And that analogy is, of course, impossible.

Let's not soften Jesus' words here. Jesus says that it is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Before we complete that thought, let's look at Jesus' second point. Verse 24, "Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God.'" Here Jesus, I think intentionally, leaves out the word "rich" as he repeats himself. It's hard for anyone to enter the kingdom of God; rich, poor, middle class. It's hard for everybody, because everybody has something they have to leave behind in order to do it. Everybody must in obedience to Jesus, rid themselves of their obstacles to Jesus' absolute claim on their lives. Everybody must, in a sense, sell, give, then follow.

And the disciples are astonished. "Who then can be saved?" they ask. In their view, wealth was confirmation of God's blessing, but now Jesus is teaching that it's really a curse. If the rich and poor alike can't enter the kingdom of God, then who can?

And this leads us to Jesus' third point; and that is that it's impossible for everyone, for all people, to do this on their own power. "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

If you, in this room, are trusting in Christ, then God has performed an impossible miracle in your life. Whatever you recall about how you came to faith, the particular circumstances, the people who lead you there, one thing is commonly true among all of you: God set you free from your death grip to the things that were holding you back before, and gave you the ability to take that step of obedience that allowed you to follow him. That is a miracle.

So the consequence of that miraculous work in your heart is that all throughout your life, you ought to have a loose hold on things. And those things that you once used for your own wealth, security, social standing, their purpose is now inverted. You are free to be generous, not just with money but with your time. Any unjust defamation against your character, any insults, you can let them go. You no longer have to clutch at these things for yourself, because God's economy is a unified budget. You can recognize that what he has given you is still his, so why not give it back to him.

So any talk of generosity, real self-giving generosity, outside of Christ is just blabber. It's nonsense; because we can do none of the sort apart from him. This is a liberating gift, to be able to let things go, so let's live in that freedom. Only in the context of the gospel can we talk about generosity, and that's why Paul writes to Timothy, "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way

they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

But what if you haven't done that act of obedience that would enable you to follow Jesus? Why should you? You might see it like this rich man did. It's too high a price. Jesus is asking too much. Maybe you're like this rich man, not in wealth, but in that all you want is some teaching, some word of wisdom that will make it all make sense. You just want a better life, you just want the cherry on top. If it's so costly, why should you take that step?

Well you're right. It is costly. In fact Jesus says in verse 30 that you could lose your home, your brothers, your sisters, your mothers, your children and your fields, all that you hold dear. On top of that he says that you could be persecuted. Ask any of those in our congregation who came to faith in Christ from Islam: these are real costs. They have had to leave many of these things.

But if you notice in our story of this rich man, in verse 21 it says that “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” He loved him before he told him to sell, give and follow. It was an act of love for Jesus to tell this man to give up his wealth, because he knew that it would kill him. And notice that Jesus loved him, but he let him go. He wasn't going to barter with him. He didn't stop him and say, “But wait until you see what you get out of this deal.” It wasn't a fair trade, because in the kingdom of God, there is no such thing as an equitable transaction. Jesus himself says as much in verse 31, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

No, it's not a fair trade. Because whatever you must give up to follow Jesus doesn't compare with what he gave up so that you could. You see, this rich young man had stopped Jesus while he was on a journey. Verse 32,

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. “We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

Jesus loved this poor rich man, but he let him go, and he continued on his way to his death. The cost that Jesus requires of you, however great, is a pittance; because the cost to Jesus for you to follow him was himself. It's not equitable, it's not fair, but it was necessary. Just as Jesus didn't barter with this rich man, he's not going to barter with you. Instead, he has died for you. Now will you sell, give and follow? I can almost promise you that you will not get your best life now, but you will get **life**.

As we close, let's hear what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed for his faith in Nazi Germany says about the cost of this grace that Jesus offers:

“Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man (us) his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: “for you were bought with a price,” and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.”