

One Thing
Mark 10:17-31
ABC 11/19/23

Open to Mk 10 as we continue our study through Mark's gospel. In our text today Jesus tells a rich man that if he wants to enter the kingdom of God, he must sell all he has, give the proceeds to the poor, & follow Jesus. Does this make Christianity a works based religion? Of course not. The point is that no one can enter the kingdom on their own merit. Child-like faith & dependence on God are necessary for entrance into God's kingdom (10:13-16) & a love of riches & trust in them represents a huge obstacle to the faith that's necessary to inherit eternal life.

1. The Dialogue (17-22) 17

Jesus is **setting out**, ultimately to Jerusalem & the cross, when a man runs up & kneels before Him. This episode is often called the story of the *rich young ruler*, because Matthew says he was young (Mt 19:20) & Luke refers to him as a **ruler** (Lk 18:18), probably in a synagogue. Several things about this influential would have shocked the bystanders. 1st, he **ran up to** Jesus. Middle Eastern men of status didn't run. To run you had to gather up your robes & expose your legs which was considered undignified & shameful. He also **knelt before** Jesus, assuming a humble posture in the presence of the One whom the religious establishment hated as a false prophet & wanted to destroy. Calling Jesus **Good Teacher** is unusual, & the phrase isn't used elsewhere in Judaism.¹ This man probably thinks of himself as **good** as well & asks his question from one **good** man to another. He wants to know how to ensure that his goodness will pay off in eternal life.² His question is synonymous with being **saved** (26) & **entering the kingdom of God** (23-25). The man realizes that such an inheritance isn't guaranteed, so he asks, **What shall I do ...?** The man's question is sometimes seen as negative, seeking to be saved by *doing*, that is, earning or meriting his own salvation through works instead of through faith in God. But Jesus is going to respond with what the man must do as well (19). The point isn't faith versus works but man's love for riches over his love for God & his trust in those riches instead of humble dependence on God. The grammar

¹ RT France, *Mark*, p 400

² David E. Garland, *Mark*, p 395

indicates he expects Jesus to give some great deed he could do which would settle things with God once & for all. **What shall I do to inherit eternal life?** That's a good question but Jesus doesn't immediately answer it. Instead He responds to the man's calling Him **Good Teacher**. **18**

Jesus' answer has caused some to think that Jesus is saying He's not good & He's not God. That's false. This isn't a statement about who Jesus is but a question setting the stage for Jesus' teaching that follows. The man is about to claim that he's kept God's commandments (20). Jesus proactively challenges his idea of goodness & redefines it in relation to God. **Good** is absolute, not relative. People may be more or less **good** but only God is absolutely, perfectly, & eternally **good**.³ In comparison to God's perfection, no one is **good** & no one's worthy of eternal life. Jesus responds, *How can you address any human teacher as **good**? Only God is truly **good**.* By doing this, Jesus nullifies the man's claim about his own goodness before he's even made it & He sets up the conclusion that no one can earn or deserve salvation (27). Jesus then continues by pointing the man to the 2nd table of the Ten Commandments, those dealing with a person's relationship with others (Ex 20:12–17). **19**

If you know the 10 commandments you realize **do not defraud** isn't one of them. For some reason Jesus replaced **do not covet** with **do not defraud**. This may be to apply the command more directly to the rich, whose wealth means they're less likely to covet & are more likely to have gained their riches through fraud or corruption.⁴ Many believed then, as now, that riches could only be had by defrauding others of their fair share. Or it could simply mean defrauding is viewed as the action that follows the internal sin of coveting. Whatever the case, how does the man respond? **20**

The man's response isn't meant to be arrogant, as Jesus' response in vs 21 will show, but expresses confidence that he's lived a righteous life before God. Far from being convicted by his inability to attain to the perfection of the law, this man was convinced he'd kept the law. He's no doubt thinking of outward compliance to the law, keeping its letter, rather than the true heart righteousness Jesus speaks about in the SOTM (Mt 5:21–28). Paul expressed similar confidence in

³ John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, p 78

⁴ Craig Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, p 96

his ability to keep the law before coming to Christ (Phil 3:6). But the man must sense something's still lacking, since he pursues this issue with Jesus. Look at the 1st part of vs **21a**.

Only Mark mentions Jesus' prolonged gaze & love for the man. Jesus doesn't sneer at his claims to have obeyed the law. He loves him. But then Jesus drops a bombshell. **21b**

Jesus says the man lacks **one thing** & then gives 4 commands: go, sell everything, give to the poor, & follow Jesus. The 4 combine to make up **one thing**, that is to give up one's own life to live wholly for God. Though shocking in context, this is nothing new. Jesus has already taught that being His disciple means denying yourself, taking up your cross, & following Him (8:34). But why did Jesus command this man to get rid of his riches? Simply because He knew materialism occupied the place of God in this man's life. Because of this, he lived in perpetual transgression of the 1st Commandment against having other gods before the true God (Ex 20:3). Not only that, but the man's great wealth prevented the helpless, childlike dependence which Jesus had just said was necessary for entrance into His Kingdom. This man's wealth was his 1st love & it was keeping him from fulfilling the greatest commandment, to love God with heart, soul, mind, & strength (Mt 26:36-40). He loved his riches more than he loved God & was trusting in them instead of in God. Jesus says go & give all you have to the poor & follow Me. At the beginning of His ministry, Jesus pointed to the 2 things necessary to receive the kingdom of God: **repent & believe** (1:15). Jesus' command here recalls these. This man must repent of his love for riches & put his faith in Jesus instead. His problem is he's trusting in himself, his righteous deeds, & his personal resources. As last weeks text taught, to inherit eternal life one must become like a child, empty & without status (10:14-15). If he'll do this he'll have **treasure in heaven**. Such treasure isn't about mansions or wealth in heaven but represent eternal life in relationship with God. The man has received the answer to his question. What will he do? **22**

The man's sincerity is evident as he leaves, sad & grieving. He left **saddened** which carries the sense of shocked dismay.⁵ The verb appears only one other time in the NT, where it indicates a gloomy, threatening sky before a storm (Mt 16:3). The man never questioned the truthfulness of

⁵ BDAG, p 949

what Jesus said. He didn't quibble or argue; he just walked away. When it became clear that what Jesus was offering was going to cost him his possessions, he decided the price was too high, even for eternal life. He was guilty of worshiping his wealth & God tolerates no rivals. **No one can serve two masters; Jesus said, for either he will hate the one & love the other, or he will be devoted to one & despise the other. You cannot serve God & wealth** (Mt 6:24). Earthly wealth was this man's god. He leaves without salvation because the power of wealth has such a firm grip on him. The blessing of riches becomes a curse when they become an obstacle to a right relationship with God. Unlike children, who simply receive what God gives, the rich young man thought he could do what Jesus required & went away sad when Jesus set the bar higher than he was willing to go.

2. The Teaching (23-27) Jesus now turns to the disciples & provides commentary on what's played out before them. **23-24**

Looking around signifies *a commanding survey of the situation, as though Jesus looks to see whether the disciples will follow the rich man's example.*⁶ Jesus 1st states the difficulty the rich have in entering the kingdom of God (23). After the disciples express shock (24a), He repeats the statement (24b-c) & then drives the point home with a shocking analogy (25). The disciples' amazement probably arose because of the common Jewish view that riches were a sign of God's favor & blessing. After all, Prov 10:22 says, **It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich.** Many have the same viewpoint today. But Jesus doesn't promise wealth & prosperity. He promises persecution & hardship instead. Financial wealth actually makes salvation more difficult because wealth gives a false sense of security. Paul commanded Timothy, **Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy** (1 Tim 6:17). The rich are consumed with the things of the world, & where their treasure is, their hearts will be also (Mt 6:21). John issued a similar warning:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh & the lust of the eyes & the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world (1 Jn 2:15-16).

⁶ James Edwards, *Mark*, 313.

Jews in Jesus' day believed in an ancient form of prosperity theology that equated God's blessing with material prosperity. To the Jewish mind it was inconceivable that riches could be a barrier to the Kingdom.⁷ In their religious system, it should be easy for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, not impossible. We need to hear what Jesus was saying: *wealth is a handicap!* At the end of the SOTM He warned:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth & rust destroy, & where thieves break in & steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, & where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Mt 6:19–21).

Jesus frequently spoke of the destructive power of riches (Mk 4:19; Mt 6:19–21, 24; Lk 12:13–34) & does so here. **How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God... Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God (23-24).** Jesus' calling the disciples **children** occurs only here in Mark & gives an affectionate tone. Jesus may also be alluding back to those who must become like **children** to enter the kingdom of God (10:15–16; cf 9:36–37). Notice the 2nd statement leaves out wealth. It's simply **how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God**. Why? Because we want to do something to be saved. The disciples' reaction shows they hadn't yet broken free from the legalistic system in which they'd been raised. If Jesus' previous statement was shocking, the analogy He now gives is even more so. 25

The difficulty of entering the kingdom of God that Jesus clearly states has resulted in various attempts to soften it. Perhaps the most famous is the claim that there was a small gate leading into Jerusalem known as the *Needle's-Eye Gate*. A camel could pass through only by having its baggage removed & then crawling on its knees. In this case, Jesus would be teaching that the rich can enter the kingdom only by unburdening themselves of their love of riches & coming humbly to God. The problem with this interpretation is that there's no reliable evidence for the existence of such a gate. This theory was 1st suggested by an 11th-century Byzantine commentator.⁸ Another proposal follows a few late manuscripts that read *rope* instead of **camel** because the Greek words are similar. Of course, this doesn't help much, though a less absurd image, a rope still can't pass

⁷ William Lane, p 369

⁸ Robert Gundry, *Mark*, p 565

through the eye of a needle. As evidence that Jesus meant what He said are several rabbinic parallels that draw the equally absurd analogy of an elephant passing through the eye of a needle. While the elephant was the largest animal of Mesopotamia (where the Babylonian Talmud was compiled), the camel was the largest in Israel. The eye of a needle was the smallest opening imaginable. The image of a camel trying to squeeze through one is absurd & impossible. In one sense Jesus' statement is certainly an intentional exaggeration meant to shock the disciples. In another sense, however, it isn't hyperbole, since the point Jesus will make in vs 27 is that it's impossible to enter the kingdom of God without divine intervention. The obvious point isn't that salvation is difficult, but that it's humanly impossible for everyone by any means, including the wealthy. It would be easy for us to think that this applies only to the extra-rich. But we're all wealthy. We like to think this is only for the rich, which we define as those who have more than we do. But we have everything we need & more. For most of the world, we live in luxury. This passage has something to say to all of us. What we do with our wealth shows our spiritual health. Jesus regards possessions as an almost insurmountable obstacle that prevent one from giving oneself completely to God. What are we to do? We must rid ourselves of dependence on our wealth. We must also invest our wealth in God's work in such a way that it affects our lifestyle. In other words, there should be some things we don't buy, some places we don't go, & some pleasures we forego because we've given so much to God.⁹ No rich person can enter the kingdom of God while trusting in their riches. But what's impossible for humans has been made possible by God. **26-27**

The disciples are now **even more astonished** & ask, **then who can be saved?** If this man, who's apparently kept the commandments his whole life & who's been blessed with great riches, if this man can't be saved, then who can? Again, **saved** is synonymous with inheriting eternal life (17) & entering the kingdom of God (23-25). It's a great question. Who can be saved? Sinners, by their own power, will, & efforts, can't save themselves (Jer 13:23); only a sovereign act of God can change the heart (Jn 1:11-13; 3:3-8; 6:44, 65). When sinners, by the work of the Spirit, reach the point where they desire to repent & be saved, having acknowledged their guilt, cry out to God &

⁹ R Kent Hughes, *Mark: Jesus, Servant & Savior*, vol. 2, p 66

ask Him graciously to forgive their sins & save them through Jesus Christ. Their only plea, like the repentant tax collector, is **God, be merciful to me, the sinner!** (Lk 18:13). Jesus' answer is the climax to which the episode has been building: *What is impossible for human beings is possible for God.* Though no one can be saved by their own efforts, God has provided a way. That way, though not given here, is the gift of salvation available through Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, who will give His life as a ransom for us (10:45).

3. The Response (28) In contrast to the rich man's failure to repent (give up all) & believe (follow Jesus), Peter asserts that the disciples have already done that. **28**

It's curious that Peter says, **we have left everything**, since it seems he still possessed a home & a fishing boat (1:29; 3:9; 4:1, 36; cf Jn 21:3). This tells us that Jesus doesn't call on everyone to give up everything they own to follow Him. Since Jesus doesn't deny Peter's claim, it seems that giving up all means sacrificing those things that represent a roadblock to true faith in God. If there's any inappropriate pride in Peter's remark, Mark doesn't highlight it, & Jesus' response affirms that Peter & the disciples represent the contrast to the rich man's failure.

4. The Promise (29-31) **29-30**

Jesus promises that their sacrifice won't be for nothing. The things **left** or *forsaken*, including home, family, & property, parallel those things gained, except that **father** isn't mentioned in the latter. This may be because believers have one Father in heaven (cf Mt 23:9). Curiously, while parents, siblings, & children are mentioned, spouses are not, possibly because Jesus has just taught about the permanence of marriage (10:1-12). Notice as well that these things are given up **for My sake & for the sake of the gospel**. This confirms the close identification of Jesus with the *good news* of the kingdom of God (1:15). The kingdom arrives through His life, death, & resurrection. The gains are in both eras of salvation history, **this present age & in the age to come**. Eternal life in the age to come is clear enough. But in what sense does the believer gain homes & family & farms in the present age? The likely answer is that all believers stand together as one family, as brothers & sisters in Christ, whose possessions are ultimately God's & so shared by all. We see this in the early church (Acts 2:42; 4:32). Any Christian who has experienced the fellowship & hospitality of

fellow believers in some other part of the world understands Jesus' words here. It's significant that early in Mark's gospel Jesus identifies His followers as his true mother & brothers & sisters (3:33–34). All believers become part of the church, the body of Christ. While many lose their earthly families when they become Christians, they find they've gained a spiritual family & are given many fathers, mothers, sisters, & brothers in Christ. That mutual caring has marked the church since its inception on the day of Pentecost. When the church was born, it had travelers who'd come from Jewish settlements outside of Israel. After their conversion, the new believers didn't want to go home because there were no churches except for the one in Jerusalem. They stayed, some of them permanently, in the homes of the believers who were already there. Those believers fed them, housed them, & loved & cared for them. Years later, Paul would travel all over the Mediterranean region, collecting an offering to take back to the Jerusalem church so it could continue to care for the needy believers there (2 Cor 8–9). The statement **along with persecutions** may reflect the realities of those Mark was writing to. But this doesn't mean this phrase was added by Mark. Jesus repeatedly predicted not only His own suffering, but also the suffering of His followers (8:34–38; 9:49; 10:38–39; 13:9–13). In the present age, though the blessings of salvation are already present, they are also *not yet*. Jesus' followers must be prepared to suffer as He did. Yet the certainty of ultimate reward, eternal life in the age to come, should provide comfort & consolation. What the rich young ruler came seeking is the certain inheritance of those who forsake all to follow Jesus in faith.¹⁰ **31**

In contrast to the rich & powerful, who appear to be 1st in the present age, stand the persecuted disciples, who have forsaken all to follow Jesus. In terms of spiritual realities, they're receiving far more in the present age & eternal life in the age to come.

To American Christians, this is one of the most challenging & difficult passages in the Bible. Jesus' teaching stands in stark contrast to those who advocate a *prosperity gospel*, in which wealth is seen as a sure sign of God's blessings. Even those who know the errors of that theology find the rich man's plight uncomfortably close to home. As we've seen, a number of attempts have been

¹⁰ Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, p 445

made to avoid the plain meaning of the text, including the invention of a *Needle's Eye Gate* in Jerusalem or the changing of the text to read *rope* instead of **camel** (25). Others explain this away by assuming there are 2 levels of discipleship & that Jesus' radical call is for those who want the higher level. But this completely misses the point of the passage, which concerns the most fundamental issue for every believer, whether it be called eternal life (17, 30), entrance into the kingdom (23-25), or salvation (26). Others want to dodge the text's impact by watering it down so that only those who trust in their riches fall under Jesus' condemnation. It's true, of course, that Jesus doesn't command all His followers to sell all their possessions & give to the poor. Some of His disciples retained homes & tools of their livelihood (1:29; 3:9; 4:1, 36; Jn 21:3). Joseph of Arimathea was a man of means & a follower of Jesus (Mk 15:42-46). Luke refers to prominent women who supported Jesus' ministry, something impossible to do had they sold it all (Lk 8:1-3). After Zacchaeus announces that he's giving ½, not all, of his possessions to the poor & repaying fourfold anyone he's defrauded, Jesus announces that **salvation has come to him** (Lk 19:9). The early church had wealthy members who gave generously but also retained a portion of their wealth (Acts 4:34-37; 5:1-4). These passages show that the early church was neither communist nor communal, & didn't require the selling or pooling of all resources. Those who breathe a sigh of relief at these exceptions are precisely the ones to whom Jesus is speaking. In other words, all of us! Before we dismiss this passage as *for others*, we need to read all of Scripture, which clearly teaches the seductive & destructive power of riches, the need to reach out generously to those in need, & that nothing we do for ourselves can earn eternal life. It's only through faith in God's gift of grace, coming like a dependent child, that we can be saved. Those who invest only in themselves, in their security, & in their own comfort & pleasure need to know they are making a bad investment.¹¹ The danger of wealth is a leading theme in Jesus' teaching, especially in Luke's gospel. In addition to beatitudes for the poor, He pronounces woes against the rich & powerful (Lk 6:20-26). The story of the rich man & Lazarus illustrates the great reversal that will come to the rich who ignore the needs of the poor (Lk 16:19-31), & the parable of the rich fool relates the fate

¹¹ Garland, p 402

of those who store up things for themselves but aren't rich toward God (Lk 12:16–21). Riches are dangerous because they bring superficial contentment & ease. They distract us from what's truly important & of eternal value. You cannot serve both God & money (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13). Wealth also tends to breed sins of selfishness, like pride & greed & coveting. Paul points both to the fleeting nature of riches & to their destructive power:

For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. If we have food & covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation & a snare & many foolish & harmful desires which plunge men into ruin & destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, & some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith & pierced themselves with many griefs (1 Tim 6:7–10).

Few are willing to risk stripping themselves of whatever provides them security in this life to enter a new quality of life under God's rule & care.

The story's told of a rich man who stood up in church to recount how God had blessed him in remarkable ways. He told how, as a young man, he was sitting in church after he'd received his 1st small paycheck from his 1st job. As the offering plate was passed, a small voice inside him said, *Give it all to God*. At 1st he resisted, but the voice persisted until he signed the check over to the church & dropped it in the offering place. He explained to the congregation that from that point on, God had blessed him immeasurably & that he'd become a wealthy man. After he sat down a dear old lady sitting behind him leaned forward & whispered in his ear, *I dare you to do it again!*¹²

How hard it is for a rich man, who has been given so much, to relinquish it all for the kingdom of God! No Christian is immune from the danger of wealth & possessions. Covetousness is like a virus that takes residence in the soul & begins to slowly work its destruction. The love of acquisition & an appetite for self-gratification deadens the desire for self-sacrifice & promotes self-sufficiency, not Christ-sufficiency.¹³

If riches aren't the goal, the holy grail of life, what are they for? They are God's resources entrusted to us to accomplish His purposes. These purposes include caring for the poor & reaching out to those in need. Jesus proclaimed the gospel as good news to the poor & freedom for the oppressed (Lk 4:18). He fed the multitudes & cared for the sick. He pronounced beatitudes on the poor because they're recipients of God's grace & His kingdom (Lk 6:20–23). The early church consistently met the needs of its own, reaching out to widows (Acts 6:1–6; cf Js 1:27) & sharing

¹² Strauss, p 447

¹³ Garland, p 403

resources (Acts 2:42; 4:32). Essential for all believers is the principle of good stewardship, that all we have is God's & should be used for His purposes. Everything we have is a sacred trust from God. Before making purchases we need to ask: *How will this help to accomplish God's purpose on earth? With this investment am I seeking God's kingdom or my own selfish desires?* While the danger of riches & the importance of good stewardship are important in the application of this passage, it begins & ends with the fundamental question of eternal life (17, 31). The rich man believed that his obedience was complete & wanted confirmation from Jesus to make sure. But Jesus teaches that salvation is beyond human power to achieve. On the surface, this rich man appears to have everything going for him. He's both a good man & a gifted one. But Jesus makes it clear this isn't enough. Jesus doesn't speak out of anger at the man's wealth, greed, or self-righteousness. He speaks rather out of deep love & desperate concern for the man's eternal destiny (21). He sees that this man has made wealth his god. Only radical surgery will cure this cancer & allow God's grace to transform him. He must give up everything, his whole life, & follow Jesus. The command to sell everything is equivalent to Jesus' earlier command to His disciples to **deny** themselves, & **take up** their **cross & follow** Jesus (8:34). Salvation comes not through human effort but through the rejection of self & complete dependence on God, becoming like a child. Salvation, though it costs us nothing, costs everything, our very lives. This event prepares us for Jesus' announcement to His disciples that He'll give His life as a ransom for many (10:45). What Jesus offers doesn't depend on what people do for themselves but on what's done for them. No one enters the kingdom by their own strength. Giving oneself completely over to God seems impossible, but Jesus didn't need to die on a cross for something that everyone finds easy. Following Jesus, which leads to salvation, doesn't depend on human ability. It comes from the One who makes all things possible.

Those with possessions may find coming under God's rule so hard because they think they have so much to lose. But God requires the same of everybody, rich & poor, fishermen & toll collectors, prosperous landholders & destitute day laborers. All must give up whatever stands in the way of total commitment to following Jesus. The rich who reject Jesus will be spiritually poor forever. On

the other hand, those who forsake all to follow Him will receive eternal riches. Those who store up their treasure in heaven understand the truth expressed by the missionary & martyr Jim Elliot: *He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.*¹⁴

¹⁴ Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p 247